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# Body Language: Representations of Dis/Ability in Life Writing and Improvisational Dance

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BODY LANGUAGE:

Representations of Dis/Ability in Life Writing and Improvisational Dance

by

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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

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PROFESSOR GAIL ABRAMS

April 20, 2012

Still other times, the 'book' has felt more like a performance piece, something in which the act of doing both equaled and surpassed the notion of a single moment in which a piece is 'completed'...the conceptual became the 'real' through an applied process which itself was invisible.

- Lucy Grealy, in a letter to Ann Patchett

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to my readers, Emily Cuming and Gail Abrams, for their unwavering support every step of the way. Thank you also to Jessica Harris and Javier Baca, two of the most extraordinary dancers I have ever had the pleasure of meeting, for bringing Contact Improvisation into my life. It is there to stay.

Thank you to the faculty and staff of the Claremont Colleges, particularly the Humanities and Dance departments, for providing me with the resources and determination to complete this project. Finally, thank you to my friends and family for holding my hand, guiding me forward, and letting me fly.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Every disease is a work of art/if you play it rightly.

- Gwyneth Lewis, *Angel of Healing*

In English, the root “dis-” is often treated like a mask; remove it, and a perfectly legible word still exists underneath. The disempowered are only ever three letters away from empowerment, and disembodiment may be resolved with the flick of a syllable; language, like life, can appear to be a world of black and white that may be categorized and therefore comprehended. However, behind these clean lines, are the in-betweens—the monstrous “harbingers of category crisis” (Cohen 6) who remind us that disgruntlement does not modify “gruntlement,” and that no “tort” exists that can then be distorted. *Disability* is a word that is expected to encompass a wide range of physical and mental experiences; however, it is not the opposite of ability, despite its semantic stance as such. Ability exists on a spectrum: one may be equally debilitated by depression as by a car accident, though only one is socially recognized as disability. “English is not a very flexible language in terms of the body” (Albright 86), but it forms the basis for our social categories; and despite the fact that it *describes* rather than *invents*, it can influence perception to the point where “our experience of a Chagall painting actually depends to some extent on whether our language has a word for blue” (*LA Times* qtd. in Morrison 323). It stands to reason, then, that our treatment of disability is influenced—disabled, even (Kuppers 58)—by the word: it separates the reality of lived experience into a binary in order to make it decipherable. But are we underestimating our capacity to read different languages?

A couple of years ago, I attended a performance of Heidi Latsky’s GIMP project, a mixed-ability dance performance that explored issues of connection and communication between bodies of radically different abilities. At the time, I was astonished by a show

unlike anything I had ever seen; and like many observers of physically disabled dancers, I articulated my experience with the language of mystique and awe. *Did you see her? She had no legs, but looked taller than anyone I've ever seen!*

At the onset of this project, I expected GIMP to be one of my primary sources; however, the more literature I read on the topic of disability and its intersection with dance, the more curious I became about Latsky's choreographic tactics. Can she, for example, effectively represent the experiences of those living with disabilities when she has never identified as disabled? This question cropped up in my personal experience as well; on numerous occasions, my peers asked why I was interested in studying disability—as if it were a category isolated from the realm of normal inquiry, one that I surely could not be interested in without personal, physical impetus. Though I could not pinpoint it at the time, I could only say that there was some reason—some force driving my project—that led me to question why, as a nondisabled person, I was not expected to regret the absence of disability studies from my undergraduate college discourse. I had been considering issues of ability since I began my classical ballet training, a world that I devoted a decade of my life to pursuing. During this time, issues surrounding body image were prevalent enough that it was normal for dancers to periodically crumple into heaps on the floor, unable to move; if that is not a disabling experience, what is? What defines disability, and who gets to decide?

In *Monster Culture: Seven Theses*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen offers a way of reading cultures through what they hold to be monstrous. Whether they are vampires and werewolves, or—as the American media currently suggests, fear of aging, and bodily imperfection—“monsters are the embodiment of a cultural moment” (Cohen 4). While I

do not wish to suggest that the disabled body is monstrous, I believe that its position as the representation of corporeal Otherness—of a body that has rebelled against its host, reminding those around it of the same potential disruption—makes it an ideal lens for accessing and exposing some of the fears currently at the heart of American culture. Disabled bodies are at once “incoherent”—understood to be the opposite of abled— and yet are also undeniably *same*; they are what Cohen calls “disturbing hybrids...a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (6).

This grey area is what allows for the “propensity to shift” (Cohen 5), for the monster to perform different versions of itself until it can no longer be categorized—making it more difficult for an audience to understand, and therefore judge. Though Cohen’s argument does not concentrate on disability, *Monster Theory* provides interesting groundwork for viewing the disabled body, particularly in its performance of identity: considering that our “fear of the monster is really a type of desire” (Cohen 16), what prompts us to disown it? If “the same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies” (Cohen 17), what relevance does this have for the historic place of racial, sexual, and bodily Otherness in *dance*, which has long been celebrated as a medium for voyeurism? Finally, what forums allow for supposed ‘creatures’ of Otherness to become *creators*—who “attract the gaze,” and then “show it those sights which will brutalize, horrify, repulse, or shame it” (Pafunda 314)?

Despite its connection to theories surrounding racial and sexual Otherness, historically, disability has itself been Othered by these categories. Perhaps because it is “the most unstable designation of them all” (Bérubé qtd. in Samuels 65), the study of disability as an identity category did not gather momentum until the past two decades—



and even now, it is rarely given due emphasis in academic discourse, despite the fact that disabled people make up the largest minority in the United States (Crutchfield & Epstein, 14). What accounts for this gap? According to Samuels, “the disabled body is a nightmare for the fashionable discourse of theory because that discourse has been limited by the very predilection of the dominant, ableist culture” (Samuels 68). Even Judith Butler, whose theories of performativity and the appropriation of gender give voice to marginal discursive subjects, takes a stance that assumes her own position as a woman who can “walk, talk, give birth, see, and be seen” (Samuels 65). While *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* paved the way for disability theorists to apply concepts of parody and performativity to their studies—notably Robert McRuer with *Crip Theory*, an examination of disability and queerness—any careless application of one identity category to another necessarily undermines the specificity of both.

As Cohen suggests, another reason that disability has been consistently bypassed is the fact that because it is a hybrid, its definition is slippery; perhaps part of the motivation behind the semantic strictness of *disability* was the hope that if it can be contained “linguistically and theoretically, then the society would do that as well” (Linton 115). If they are not given a name, they must not exist. However, the reality of the bodies lurking behind that label represents an avalanche of potential energy that may at any moment break loose and override organized notions of acceptability. Attempts have been made in recent years to come up with an accurate prototype for studying disability; one example is the British “Social Model of Disability,” attributed to Mike Oliver in 1983. In this model, which grew from the “hard-line, male-dominated, and determined” (Shakespeare 198) Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation

(UPIAS), disability is understood to be distinguished from impairment: the former is a social construction, and the latter is rooted in the physical. This model, which sees “disability as something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (Shakespeare 198), places the burden on society to remove the barriers—physical and theoretical—that prevent disabled people from accessing public spaces. At its best, the model seeks to remove pressure from disabled people themselves and to unite them in a collective force that is empowered, worthy, and mad as hell.

However, as Tom Shakespeare points out, the model contains critical flaws. For one, it was developed by a small group of largely white, heterosexual men, most of whom had injured spinal cords. This homogeneity contributed to the Social Model’s lack of range; not only does it gloss over less visible disabilities, it runs the risk of implying that impairment may be alleviated by political mobilization—when oftentimes, the physical aspect of disability is unable to be ignored, even for a second. It assumes that the solution lies in removing environmental barriers in order to accommodate every disability, despite the impossibility—and oftentimes, undesirability—of that goal; leading to Shakespeare’s claim that the model “is a blunt instrument for explaining and combating the social exclusion that disabled people face, and the complexity of our needs” (202). If physical spaces may not be altered to fit every need, perhaps the solution lies in the less tangible spheres—art, dance, literature—that can bend not only to accommodate, but also to *celebrate* each individual rung on the ladder of ability.

While significant progress has been made in disability studies, and the body of literature on integrated arts is growing, the field contains critical limitations that do not

allow for a full understanding to be reached. Disability is not simply a “minority issue,” a problem for only a select few: as Irving Zola states, “disability is a universal experience of humanity” (qtd. in Shakespeare 203). It has historically been partitioned from other identity categories because, according to Shakespeare, sexual and racial differences do not impede the body from functioning; but disability is “difficult to recuperate as a concept, as it refers either to limitation and incapacity, or else to oppression and exclusion, or else to both” (Shakespeare 202). What we have, then, is an issue of perception; more so than any bodily malfunction, the societal portrayal of disability as a “lack” is in need of rehabilitation. In this thesis, I argue that giving voice and expression to the disabled experience can do this by restoring authority to the individual experiences that reframe the able-bodied advantage as one with “losses as well as gains to be contemplated” (Linton 69). I believe that the same mediums that define disability—language and physical ability—are also the means for its release: not only separately, but *together*. Writing—specifically life writing—and Contact Improvisation, a postmodern dance form, articulate disability with new vocabularies, reframing its position in society and allowing the complexity that Shakespeare bemoans as missing to materialize to its fullest.

My experience with GIMP broadened my interest in how bodily truths are articulated, and led me to seek out the forums that facilitate that effort. On the one hand, I chose to focus on dance because—of all the physical arts—it is the most notoriously concerned with bodily perfection, and therefore provides a keyhole for investigating when, and *how*, non-normative bodily experiences are depicted. I began to research the field of physically integrated dance in an effort to pinpoint what is working, and

significantly, what is not; but of all the dance forms I investigated, I believe that only one captures the unpredictable, dialogical nature of illness and disability in a way that is true to life. Contact Improvisation (CI) allows for freedom, and a breaching of boundaries, that traditional narrative-bound dance does not. By its very nature, CI is spontaneous; it has no formal aesthetic to cling to, and thus is malleable—similar to contemporary life writing, which has “proved remarkably flexible in adapting to new voices and assuming new shapes” (Smith & Watson 109).<sup>1</sup> Unlike traditional plot-bound autobiography, and unlike outsider perspectives that often feature the spirit overcoming the “broken” body,<sup>2</sup> life writing allows for the subject to revise the cultural tropes that plague disability. This freedom is even more significant for women with disabilities, because it displays the contradictions within feminist arguments that posit “rugged individualis[m]” (Ferris 91) as the only means of independence. Not only are these female bodies dependent on others, they remind us that we *all* are at some point—presenting a truth that makes many readers uncomfortable. This discomfort, however, is where the power lies: it allows for a renegotiation of expectations and ideals, so long as the medium grants it space to move.

While CI and life writing have been theorized in relation to disability, I am looking at them together: as two parts to a necessary whole. On a structural level, the two mirror each other in ways that connect to the physical experience of being disabled: they are capricious, disorderly, and not easily definable. Furthermore, because the reality of

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<sup>1</sup> Life writing, as opposed to traditional autobiography, refers to the act of writing the events of one’s life in a creative, often non-sequential, manner. See Smith and Watson (2001) for distinction between life writing, creative nonfiction, memoir, etc.

<sup>2</sup> “The disabled poets who seem to get the most attention often write about their disability while asserting that disability does not define them—a rhetorical tack that fits squarely into the ‘overcoming overachiever’ disability stereotype so reassuring to the nondisabled population”(Ferris 91).

being disabled is one that affects the body and the brain—equally, interchangeably, together—a more comprehensive picture is gained when that experience is examined through two lenses that are themselves intensely physical and emotional. Doing so reveals the false separation of those categories, and blends the intellectual and physical in a way that is significant for revaluing disability’s place in society. While dance is often considered a physical feat, CI engages the brain and spirit in a way that makes it uniquely qualified to uncover, and alleviate, bodily and emotional stress. Its bridging of mind and body is especially crucial in the context of disability, which often encourages a separation of the dysfunctional part from the rest of the whole; in CI, the physical interaction is always determined by the emotional state of both participants. It is a “dance of our entire being” (Pallant 100).

Additionally, though writing is often considered to be restricted to the intellectual realm, it takes a physical body to be able to write; and the nuance of corporeality often reveals itself in literary tics, breaths, momentum, and structure. While disability may limit a writer’s ability to move through the world, its manifestations are not always negative; Larry Eigner, an acclaimed poet with Cerebral Palsy, made a career out of writing only what he could see while looking out his window. Likewise, in CI, participants are often instructed to move as though one limb is paralyzed, or to shut off their vision: these restrictions are valued, not rejected.

Granted, there are countless autobiographies—particularly in the flexible realm of life writing—that capture the vulnerabilities and complexities inherent in living in *any* body, not just a disabled one. However, the reason for my interest in life writing and dance by women with disabilities is the fact that, by their very presence, these creations

combat the absence of disability from mainstream art. Their stories, and the unique way that they are told, bring readers face-to-face with deep-seated cultural fears of bodily Otherness: they claim space in a culture that does not always make room for bodies that do not fit the “ideal” mold. Even though disability is not always the main subject, it “cannot help but have an impact on the artistic production of people so marked” (Ferris 91)—and the specific aesthetic of disabled bodies in motion, whether on the page or on the stage, gives voice to a marginalized population and urges reconsideration of what is deemed beautiful.

One of the primary issues with existing models for theorizing disability is the difficulty of identifying the locus of the disorder: if it originates in physical impairment, how much is each condition exacerbated by social discrimination? Shakespeare asks:

If a person with MS is depressed, how easy is it to make a causal separation between the effect of the impairment itself; her reaction to having an impairment; her reaction to being oppressed and excluded on the basis of having an impairment; [and] other, unrelated reasons for her to be depressed? (201).

In Contact Improvisation, the subject is granted the freedom to distinguish between these states; and when she is not able to, her relationship with her partner—one of weight sharing and listening—often reveals the origin. In life writing, a similar flexibility of structure gives the writer agency to distinguish between disease and dis-ease, if such a boundary even exists—because oftentimes, it is more blurred than not.

In keeping with this lack of easy categorization, I aim to demonstrate that dancing and writing may not be so easily located as physical or emotional activities; and in order to demonstrate the impossibility of any binaristic definition of disability, have chosen to take an interdisciplinary approach to the topic. I look first at written text in order to demonstrate that language, a medium that marginalizes disabled bodies, may be

appropriated and used as a source of empowerment; and then point to the limitations of language in order to argue that dance—while historically unaccommodating toward bodily difference—is the more revelatory form of communication. Rather than restrict my research to texts that explicitly theorize disability, I have expanded my search to reflect its social construction—meaning, “everyone, in a sense, is disabled because we are all disabled by *something*” (DiPietra 273). I do not wish this to undermine the specific experience of living with severe physical and mental impairments; however, by broadening my argument to examine issues of dis-ease and body image, I aim to encourage a reconsideration of the way ability and access affect everyone—regardless of the little blue sign that hangs in the front of some cars, and not in others.

In chapter one, I examine *Plaintext*, a collection of essays by Nancy Mairs. I emphasize the way in which Mairs uses the sporadic nature of essaying to reflect her complicated—and oft changing—relationship to her body, and to depict the unpredictability of living with disease. As poet Cynthia Hogue writes in “In A Mute Season,” “the phenomenology of pain/harbors words which refuse/syntax and order, predictable/eventual inevitability” (Hogue 311); and Mairs, whose disjointed text is anything but *Plain*, treats each essay as an opportunity to deny any linear “inevitability” within her ending, happy or otherwise. In chapter two, I discuss *Autobiography of a Face*, a critically acclaimed memoir by the late poet Lucy Grealy. *Face* traces Grealy’s journey through Ewing’s Sarcoma—a rare form of cancer—and even more significantly, the turmoil surrounding the largely unsuccessful reconstructive surgeries that followed her diagnosis. I address the ways that Grealy, with particular emphasis on expectations of beauty in the United States, explores the conflicts that occur when the face—the part of

her body that she equates with attractiveness—is constantly changing. I draw on the irregularity of her appearance, and the various roles that she takes on throughout her life, to undermine the idea of any singular *self* in life writing and otherwise: the lines between perspectives, and people, often touch.

Finally, in chapter three, I use my research into the field of mixed-ability dance companies to highlight Contact Improvisation as a site for altering the role of disability in mainstream dance. Rejecting the typical confinements of formal performance, ideal bodies, and classical aesthetic, CI presents an opportunity for everyone—regardless of ability—to engage in an activity that is as therapeutic as it is artistic. Structurally, CI parallels the work of Mairs and Grealy in its denial of linearity; and like the texts, challenges the typical mind/body dichotomy by denying that either one is more “crippling.” While I expand on the history and relevance of CI in chapter three, I introduce it in chapter one as a lens for analyzing Mairs’s complex relationship to touch, physical and otherwise. CI provides a tangible, visible answer to the question of origin; but rather than identify one site of disability, demonstrates how issues of the mind and body to lead to one another in a mutually informative, endless cycle. Far from being perfect, CI is not a light at the end of the tunnel—instead, like Simi Linton, it is “more interested in finding a way out of the tunnel, doing away with tunnels” (Linton 62).

If the past is a perpetually changing, volatile entity from which we are always traveling, then we must move in order to capture it. As sociologist Ken Plummer says, “[storytellers] even and more complexly can perform their stories—not just in words and scripts but as emotionally charged bodies in action” (Plummer qtd. in Smith & Watson 74). In representations of disability—a term that, from this point forward, I will



periodically refer to as dis/ability in order to heighten the interrelatedness of both states<sup>3</sup>—the narrative cannot be removed from the ailment; just as Grealy proposes “there is also no way to disentangle the physical from the thinking mind or writerly consciousness” (Mintz 52). In this thesis, I argue that life writing and Contact Improv—blank stages for the performance of endlessly changing identities—enable the perpetual change and uncertainty inherent in disability and chronic illness to be expressed in a way that is sensitive to the spectrum of individual experience. Rather than treated separately, they must be viewed as two parts of an interlocking whole. In the place of “dis-,” I argue for “re-”: renewal, re-visitation, and cultural revision of dis/ability as a subject that brings each and every one of us in closer contact with our embodied selves.

## CHAPTER ONE

Nancy Mairs: *Plaintext*

When I walk, I aim to get somewhere. If my meters are sprung, if my feet are uneven, if my path is irregular, that’s just how I walk. And how I write.  
-Jim Ferris, “The Enjambed Body”

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<sup>3</sup> See Roberts and Swadener, *Semiotics and Dis/Ability: Interrogating Categories of Difference* (2001).

Perhaps some people are born knowing they were put on this earth in order to save it. Perhaps they, the lucky ones, even know what tool they intend to use: sword, brain, legs, or inky pen to blank piece of paper. Perhaps the latter, the writer, really does wake up on the morning of his or her “happily ever after” to find that the light remains golden across the land: no “hysterical weeping” (Mairs 91) from the princess, no ellipsis tugging on the tail of the neat ending. Nancy Mairs, a born writer, admits that she “love[s] closure enough to pretend that quick resolution lies among the length of a cell” (91)—however, by the time she begins writing her own story, she has lived long enough to know that “the true texts are the ones that do not end but revolve and reflect and spin out new constellations of meaning day after day, page after page” (92). Mairs may have known that her destiny was to write, but it took half a lifetime—and a handful of unanticipated self-identifications—for her to “look at the contents” of her life “squarely” (85) enough to reflect upon them. By the time it occurs, she is no longer simply *Nancy* or even *Nancy the writer*: she is a woman, mother, wife, depressive, and—most notably—a self-named “cripple” (9).

After being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, the erratic nature of her illness influenced both the content and structure of her writing: her prose reflects the jolted nature of her changed movement, a point I will return to later. However, whether or not Mairs’s disability is the focus of her writing, it is treated equally—and often, as the “logical concomitant”—to the rest of her being, including that which is more “immobilizing” (Mairs 13) than the disease itself. In *Plaintext*, a collection of essays, Mairs dips in and out of her variety of roles with the brazenness of a memoirist and the fluidity of a dancer, drawing structural parallels to the spontaneous role-shifting innate in

Contact Improvisation. Mairs inserts deliberate rhetoric into the structural disjointedness of essay writing, revising her life into one that denies any simplistic ending—meanwhile, filling in a crucial gap in the argument presented by some postmodern feminists. Mairs revises the gap, but also, revisions it: and by asking the reader to fill in the blanks left open by her “blurry right eye” (11), confronting her own fear of human touch, we are engaged in a dialogue that ends with a responsibility to alter the way we view disability.

### Rhetoric, Reliability, and Power

Nancy Mairs is not afraid to write about her body; on the contrary, she declares that she “couldn’t write bodiless prose...no body, no voice; no voice, no body” (Mairs qtd. in Mintz 23). While not every *Plaintext* essay deals explicitly with issues of embodiment, Mairs’s struggle to understand her “troubled” (Mairs qtd. in Mintz 40) body—both before and after her diagnosis—influences her writing at all levels. She unabashedly posits “*her* self as inextricably enmeshed” with the realities of her physical and mental state, thus “recall[ing] intellect to the body” in a way that author Suzanna Mintz recognizes as imperative (40). In *Unruly Bodies: Life Writing by Women with Disabilities*, Mintz asserts that “woman does, in the very act of telling her own story, enter a political arena by asserting the legitimacy of her participation in a domain until quite recently dominated by the *res gestae* narratives of men” (Mintz 9)—even more so when she is disabled, and belongs to a group typically excluded from the mainstream cultural presentation of femaleness. “Advertisers...deny the existence of me and my kind,” explains Mairs, so “viewers won’t feel threatened by her or his own physical vulnerability” (Mairs qtd. in Mintz 35). Therefore, it stands to reason that an entire text

devoted to one person's experience of disability —unapologetically drawing attention to its difference, yet also insisting on its undeniable sameness—will splinter delusions of “normalcy” (Mairs 24). Finally in possession of the “tools” that will allow her to “smash the entire hideous alien structure wide open” (141), Mairs does just that, utilizing everything down to the structure of her prose.

She begins by leveling the playing field, giving the majority of her essays an identical first name: *On*. She writes “On” the topic of “Being a Cripple,” “On Touching By Accident,” “On Having Adventures,” “On Living Behind Bars,” and more. Right off the bat, the reader understands that each of these aspects of Mairs's existence will be given equal weight; they are individual pieces of the patchwork life she intends to relay, of which being “a cripple” is only one. She chooses this identifying word—“cripple”—deliberately, telling the reader that “it describes [her] condition: I have lost the full use of my limbs” (Mairs 10). At age twenty-eight—after being misdiagnosed with a brain tumor—Mairs was told she had multiple sclerosis, a degenerative disease that targets the communication between nerves in the brain and spinal cord. While she states that every story she tells will be necessarily colored by her identification as a “cripple,” she intentionally picks that word because it narrows the scope of “disability” down from a term that “suggests any incapacity, physical or mental” (10). Because of a long history battling with depression, which she also considers to be disabling, Mairs semantically partitions her disease from the rest of her identity—using the word most likely to render uncomfortable a society “no readier to accept crippledness than to accept death, war, sex, sweat, or wrinkles” (10). “Perhaps I want them to wince” (9), she tells us—*us*, not them.

But where do *they* end, and where do we begin? Does she trust the reader, or does she want us to flinch as well?

In a text full of narrative twists and counter-clockwise turns, Mairs pulls the rug out from underneath her reader with the elegance of Houdini. Right after describing the “gift” (11) that has been the ten years following her phantom brain tumor, and relishing the domestic rituals that—though hardly the adventures she used to crave—fulfill the adapted “terms” (7) of her life as a cripple, she amends her tone: “Lest I begin to sound like Pollyanna, however, let me say that I don’t like having MS. I hate it” (12). Later, Mairs interrupts the description of a family vacation—much in the way that the unpredictability of her disease interrupts her day-to-day routine—to describe the “exacerbation” (19) that prevented her from enjoying it. These rapid mood-changes are not incidental: as soon as we begin to indulge in the warm and fuzzy feelings of emotional triumph and strength of spirit that often dominate writing about disability, Mairs forces us to realize her disease’s deep ambivalence. She knows that “God doesn’t give bonus points for a limp” (20), and refuses to write a memoir that will feed into the common desire for a happy ending.

After a few essays, it becomes clear that Mairs is toying with the reader’s emotions for much more than theatrical effect. In addition to her insistence on the moment-by-moment ambivalence of MS, she posits herself as an unreliable narrator who deliberately contradicts and revises her own statements over the course of one anecdote. First, she forges a critical distance: in “On Not Liking Sex,” she establishes that she is “so old now” (Mairs 85)—and will be reflecting upon her previous experiences with the sense of removal that only time allows. The essay is a revisal of an earlier piece on the

topic of sex, and Mairs uses it as a forum to undo virtually everything that she established in the previous text. “I wrote the truth when I said that I’d fallen in love with only two lovers in my life,” she tells us, “though I can’t think now who I had in mind...Quod scripsi, scripsi” (87). Later, in “On Living Behind Bars,” she begins the essay by revealing, “in truth, the windows and doors were not barred” (125)—but the image suits her description of the “space that encloses” her (153). She attributes the “gaps and lapses” in her narrative to the fact that “[her] brain was zapped twenty-one times” (125) during her stint in a mental hospital—and by unapologetically taking the space to revise her feelings about the past, to literally rewrite her personal history, she allows readers to consider our own histories while still adopting a level of initiative in interpreting hers. Chances are, we pick up on a truth that Mairs herself may not have even realized while writing; as Mintz puts it, “she grants us the authorship of our own going along” (Mintz 46).

### The Structure of Illness: Humor and Hindsight

Her game of cat-and-mouse in relaying—and re-relaying—the truth may leave us disoriented and even a little bit embarrassed, but that is not what concerns Mairs. Multiple sclerosis is an incurable disease that is “unpredictable and uncontrollable” (Mairs 11), and in keeping with that truth, Mairs refuses to provide a “progress-narrative of classic autobiographical prose,” and instead “evokes the open-ended corporeal reality” (Mintz 27) of living with her disease. In the place of linear chronology, fierce individuality, and a unified identity, all ideals of a classical type of autobiography, Mairs turns to essay writing: a form that, in its disjointedness, encompasses the instability of her

experience. “The essay provides a counternarrative,” Mintz explains, that evokes “a more realistically ambivalent effort to occupy a body that offers both pleasure and despair” (32). In *Plaintext*, this ambivalence is highlighted through a voice that—in addition to periodically correcting itself—interrupts the story’s timeline; self-reflexive and unafraid, it expresses the “paradox of chronic conditions” (Mintz 27) that render a body both permanently ill and temporarily stable. In “On Living Behind Bars,” Mairs establishes distance from her pre-collegiate expectation that “as future moves through present into past, one revises the raw material into an orderly whole...” (Mairs 131). Instead, she expresses her lifelong negotiation of the “knotty confluence and contradictions between disability, gender, and sexuality” in a form of “inventive narrative shaping” (Mintz 18) as disorderly as the life experiences themselves. A typical narrative structure, complete with a neat little bow of *happily ever after* tying off the end, would be untrue to Mairs’s physical reality. She tells readers, “I can’t be sure of the outcome, as the terminally ill cancer patient can” (Mairs 18). And though the realization of that fact throws us off-balance, neither can we.

For each moment that we find ourselves flat on our backs after having the narrative jerked out from underneath our feet, Mairs herself is experiencing a similar unpredictability of body and mind; and in the freedom of her own life writing, chooses to approach it with humor:

I pulled the door open I fell over backward, landing fully clothed on the toilet seat with my legs splayed in front of me: the old beetle-on-its back routine. Saturday afternoon, the building deserted, I was free to laugh aloud as I wriggled back to my feet, my voice bouncing off the yellowish tiles from all directions. (Mairs 9)

In reminding us that the building was “deserted,” Mairs suggests that she granted herself permission to make light of her situation because she was alone; had others been there,

she might not have been willing to laugh out loud. This type of vocalization, found here in an empty bathroom, is also found in life-writing: in contrast with the type of negative-reflection that occurs when Mairs internalizes the looks and expectations of those observing her body, memoir provides a forum for uninhibited reflection—a chance to hear one’s voice “bouncing off” (Mairs 9) the parameters of experience. Even though her essays were written with a future audience in mind, Mairs treats them as solitary activities in which she is free to posit her disability however she chooses. As demonstrated above, she often employs humor in this endeavor: never losing sight of the “maddening and sometimes painful” (13) aspect of her disease, she emphasizes that “almost every pickle that [she] get[s] into...is funny as well” (13). For a reader who may have spent a lifetime swallowing the mainstream societal standard of normalcy, a rule contingent on codified binary, Mairs’s statements come as a radical blurring of the boundaries: the disabled body can be a source of humor as well as anguish.

While she never indulges in a story of emotional triumph, never moderating the disabled experience in order to make it easier for her reader to digest, Mairs deliberately de-stigmatizes disability by tackling it head on. Just as she uses the abstraction of essay writing to interrupt herself mid-anecdote and bounce around the timeline of her life, she describes the physical interruption of MS in a lighthearted way. Even though the resulting injuries were decidedly “not funny” and in fact very painful, when she “thinks of [her] friend talking earnestly to the hot thin air” while her legs buckled beneath her and she “dropped from his view as though through a trap door,” she declares the image to be “as silly as something from a Marx Brothers movie” (Mairs 13). Though sporadic, this type of comedy reinforces the significance of the genre in which she writes: life writing,



intensely personal and a safety net for self-effacing humor. No story can be offensive to the author, no matter how embarrassing its content, because it is disclosed with permission and the authority of his or her own voice. In Mairs's case, life writing provides for more accuracy as well; even though she chooses the word "cripple" to best describe the reality of her condition, she maintains that she would "never refer to another person as a cripple" (10). Therefore, if someone other than she were to attempt to capture her life on paper, there is no telling what politically correct—and in Mairs's opinion, erroneous—jargon would be inserted in place of her truth. "Only the life narrator knows the experience of traffic rushing toward her," and is the only one qualified to "make an interpretation of that situation, that is, write her subjectivity" (Smith & Watson 5).

Because she is the one telling her story, Mairs has the last word—and the first, for that matter—on its emotional pitch. While watching a television show attempting to depict disability, she is shocked at the way "her" body is portrayed, and remarks, "I couldn't believe anything but an inchworm could make progress humping along like that" (Mairs 17). In stark contrast, however, the freedom of her own life writing is an opportunity to present her disability however she chooses. Just as an outsider might be too nervous to call Mairs a "cripple" even though it is the description she believes to be most accurate, someone living without disability might not be brave enough to flip it on its head:

If every human being formed patches of plaque in his or her central nervous system, then I would not have multiple sclerosis; I would be normal and those without sclerotic spots...would be aberrant. (Mairs 141)

Imagining a world where everyone has MS, Mairs "rename[s] 'people who lack disabilities as the nondisabled'" (Mintz 36), because in comparison to herself, "they are the deficient ones" (36). In doing so, she demonstrates how subjective our categories are

in the first place; and she proves the capacity of language to completely reframe our conception of disability, “whatever its corporeal realities” (46).

Words contain power, and Mairs uses the act of writing as a forum for positive reflection. This is not to say that her meditations on her life are always cheery: quite the opposite. However, in the act of looking back on her experiences, Mairs is able to “look at the contents squarely” and “give tongue to the grammar” (Mairs 85) of their happening. As already mentioned, she felt compelled to write from a very young age, but it was not until Mairs was middle-aged—living with multiple sclerosis and having survived multiple suicide attempts—that she was willing to unpack the contents of her life onto paper. Cushioned by time and experience, Mairs tells the reader, and herself, that she finally understands: “I am a locus, not a terminus, of language, and what speaks to me can also be spoken and, *through utterance, transformed*” (123, emphasis mine). The act of speaking about her experiences, in all their complexity, goes beyond being an outlet for Mairs—even though she reveals that the “mandate” of writing is the only thing keeping her from “trying to kill [her]self” (104). By using language as the medium through which she fights expectations, the same structure that attempts to suppress Otherness, Mairs brings all linguistic binaries into crisis: engaging in the purposeful repetition that Judith Butler believes to be a key form of liberation.

#### Judith Butler: Performativity and Repetition

Mairs’s humor does more than just disarm her audience: it forces reconsideration of the solemn stigmatization of disability. When she paints her MS in a specific way, she engages in what Butler calls “parodic repetition” (Butler 200): a process that, by putting

the portrayal of “the rules that govern intelligible identity” (198) in the hands of the person who breaks them, draws attention to the artificiality of the “real” (200). Butler, an American philosopher who specializes in issues of embodiment and sexuality, is well known for using the idea of “performativity” in relation to representations of gender and self. Though she has been criticized for leaving the dichotomy of dis/ability out of her conversation, many disability theorists have appropriated her ideas relating to why society shames bodies appearing to be “abnormal.”<sup>4</sup> Just as the existence of a *disabled* body is crucial for the reinforcement of an *able* one, Butler explains that “binary opposition is a strategic move within a set of signifying practices” that “pits the ‘I’ against an ‘Other’ and, once that separation is effected, creates an artificial set of questions about the knowability and recoverability of that Other” (197). The existence of a deviant body provides the framework for an ideal one to be naturalized—without it, there would be no “normal” for “generative political structures” (Butler 201) to attempt to set in stone. Although she is referring specifically to the binary between sexualities, Butler’s solution for defying this construction is applicable to the dis/abled body as well.

According to Butler, the “signification” that legitimizes categories of acceptability is reinforced by its repetition in culture. Rather than subvert this repetition, Butler suggests that it is through this process itself—moreover, the “possibility of a variation on that repetition” (198)—that the lack of any original, untouched self is realized. Like Mairs’s intentionally comedic descriptions, the “parodic repetition” (Butler 200) of aberrance—for Mairs, her MS—draws attention to the fact that “the original, the authentic, and the real...are themselves...effects” (200). As Mairs does through the

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<sup>4</sup> Samuels suggests Corker 1999; Price and Shildrick 1999a; Sandahl 1999; Stocker 2001; McRuer 2006 for further research (61).

physical act of writing, Butler suggests that we can “redescribe” (203) the binaries that are presented as factual by “participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity” (201). Similar to the way that Mairs uses language—the same edifice that threatens to reduce her with its cruel oversimplification—Butler asserts that presenting a “dissonant and denaturalized performance” on the body, the site of controversy, “reveals the performative status of the natural itself” (200). In his speech on “Disability and the Aesthetics of Human Disqualification,” Tobin Siebers claims that “normalcy” is brought into crisis when the stereotypes surrounding it are intentionally repeated. When the bodies performing the tropes of normalcy are the same ones who typically suffer at the hands of such stereotypes, a power shift occurs. Suddenly, the joke is no longer on them—it is on anyone who continues to believe in one definition of ability, or of personhood itself.

As I previously mentioned, Butler has been interrogated for leaving disability out of her discussion on *Bodies that Matter*, even though her theory is in some ways “the most easily adapted” to modern disability studies (Samuels 59). Ellen Samuels explains this snub as characteristic of the topic—disability is not yet recognized in the same space as race, sexuality, and other identity-categories (58).<sup>5</sup> Where other theorists often use the relevance of Butler’s argument to justify their own ideas on the cultural significance of disability, Samuels points out the dilemma in doing so: “What meaning, or intention, is lost through the wholesale adaptation of Butler’s theoretical framework inflected only by a mere substitution of terms?” (64). She declares that inserting “able-bodiedness” or “disability” where Butler originally used “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality” runs the

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<sup>5</sup> “Critical Divides: Judith Butler’s Body Theory and the Question of Disability.” (2002).

risk of glossing over both categories for the worse. According to Samuels, who examines the work of essayist Julia Cho to prove her point, the careless layering of the disabled body onto the gendered body leaves the latter “realized,” while the “disabled body remains a reflective trope” (63). The only way to combat this imprecision, then, is to return the discussion of disability to those living with it: the life writers, like Mairs, who cannot help but grant the experience specificity. Mairs does not simply reduce her disabled body to a variation on a sexual one, she grants equal weight to each aspect of her identity. Just as Butler claims that “language sustains the body” because it erects the “matrices” that attempt to keep deviant bodies in check (qtd. in Samuels 67, 73), language also has the power—when put in the hands of those seeking to sustain it in a positive way—to rewrite history. In the context of life writing, language enables women with disabilities to take a stand on their own experiences—whether or not they can physically stand.

#### Authority and Multiplicity of Identity

One of the ways that Mairs keeps her life on her own “terms” (Mairs 18) is to acknowledge the way her self-perception will change over her lifetime, depending on the role she happens to be adopting. As previously mentioned, Mairs considers “disease” to be “simply one element of the continually revisable relation of a life” (Mintz 46): while she cannot separate her story from the way MS has altered it, disease is only one element in the “patchwork” (36) that makes up who she is. Just as *Plaintext* is structured as a collection of individual essays, each contributing to the whole but refusing to be gelled into a chronological path, Mairs represents herself as a similar collection of identities:

woman, mother, wife, professor, depressive, cripple, and *self*—past, present, and future. The freedom of writing allows Mairs to defy temporal linearity and shift between the various versions of her being, even describing her periods of depression—times when she feels most locked inside her head—with the removal of someone looking *outward*, accounting for the needs and wishes of “Future Nancy” (Mairs 18). By removing herself from one moment of her identity long enough to address the various aspects of her true “self,” she proves that she feels powerful enough to navigate between them.

By showing us that there is no such thing as a singular, cohesive self, Mairs establishes that “the ‘truth’ of the body or the self is endlessly interpretable” (Mintz 36)—and interpret she does. When she falls in love with a fellow inmate at a mental hospital, she declares that together they “*played*: two irresponsible loonies in a legally drugged haze” (Mairs 137, emphasis mine). Juxtaposed with her declaration that she has “been in terrible trouble, [but] never been insane” (127), we are led to the conclusion that each of Mairs’s characters is acted out—and that she has enough control over them to demarcate what she is and is not. “I may be a cripple,” she tells us, “but I’m only occasionally a loony and never a saint” (20). By clarifying the laws of propriety—for example, that “cripples must bear their lot meekly and cheerfully. A grumpy cripple isn’t playing by the rules”—we understand how masterful it is for her to then defy them, and play “Caliban, a most scurvy monster” instead of the more palatable “Tiny Tim” (Mairs 15). Like Butler, Mairs believes that to act is to engage in the purposeful repetition of a sign that carries with it a “multiplicity of meanings”—and in her writing, she weeds through “their implications, their resonances” (81). Mairs does more than just live her

roles as they occur; she purposefully performs each and every one of them, whether in keeping with her disability or any of the other identities she embodies.

This act of performance, of performativity, sheds new light on Butler's argument. In the space of her prose, Mairs is able to "step back" and "watch [her]self as though upon a stage" (Mairs 17): she indicates that she has a *choice* in selecting the different personas that make up her being, that she can be "sulky if I want, or blithe; temperamental or gay or pensive" (143). In her writings on embodiment and the performance of identity, Butler suggests such authority in regards to gender: someone whose phenotype hovers at the border of recognition may choose between male and female identities. This same power has not traditionally been allotted to disabled bodies, because it is assumed that physical incapacity exists out of the subject's control; for example, a paraplegic cannot stand up and choose to perform able-bodiedness. However, someone like Mairs—whose disease is not always readily identifiable—represents a critical fissure in this assumption. Depending on the day, Mairs's MS might either be completely obvious or entirely invisible, mocking onlookers in its "intransigence" (Mairs 20). Flexing her authorial control, Mairs claims that this blurriness "defeats" doctors who "think of themselves as healers"; though she is often infuriated by her disease, she is "not diminished by it—and they are...I incarnate the limitation of their powers" (20). Here, Mairs takes on a brand new identity: medical kryptonite. Whether she is anguished during bouts of depression or using her MS to subvert power hierarchies, Mairs is always at the helm of her life story. By the time she lists her seemingly mundane activities—"child-rearing, editing, writing, teaching" and taunts us by asking, "What real harm could I do?" (Mairs 149), we already know the answer: as much as she chooses to.

One of the most pervasive aspects of Butler's argument is her assertion that there is no authentic self: identity is constructed, and one may perform heterosexuality, homosexuality, and everything in between. Both disturbing and enlightening, it forces the subject to abandon any binary understanding of the categories composing sexuality or recognition. Because disability is typically shackled to the idea of a fixed body, and the subjects living with disability are considered inseparably bound to their physical difference, the line between dis/ability is not often granted the same leeway. The able-bodied might not be uncomfortable watching a disabled person enact a series of motions—or say, describe that same series in writing—because they believe they understand the limitations dictating such an experience, and do not expect to be surprised. For Mairs, this false assumption acts as the perfect gateway for disruption. Because it is unexpected, her performance of able-bodiedness—of “normalcy” and of mental stability—knocks her reader off-guard, and forces us to amend our expectations.

Thus Mairs purposefully asserts the choice involved in her suicide attempt, and meticulously describes her actions leading up to it: feeding the cat, writing a letter, and cleaning her kitchen are all domestic performances that would appear to contradict her position on the brink of insanity. On the outside, she gives such a compelling performance that “You’re more likely to think you’re seeing Mrs. Middle America than a madwoman” (Mairs 149). In regards to her MS, less disguisable than her struggle with depression, Mairs still maintains control over her performance. When describing the day-to-day activities that she completes, the domestic rituals that she associates with “normalcy,” she rarely alludes to her physical limitation; in fact, several of her *Plaintext* essays neglect to mention the fact that she has MS at all. Taken out of context, the reader



might never know. Like gender, ability is a performative state; the behavioral characteristics that define it go far beyond physical capacity, and can be appropriated by anyone who has been exposed to them. For someone like Nancy Mairs, this point is highlighted even further by the ambiguity of her disease. While sitting down waiting for a doctor to approach, she gives such a convincing performance of able-bodiedness that it takes him a moment to realize why she is there. It is not until she “push[es] [her]self up...and stumble[s] toward him” (20) that he believes he can categorize, and therefore understand, her.

Mairs claims authority with her written word, and by placing herself at an advantage, repositions MS as merely one of the many challenges she faces. She identifies disability—and the supposed opposite, “normalcy”—as mutual aspects of the performance of her identity, and makes conscious shifts between them. Even when the physical takes over, as is inevitable with a disease such as MS, Mairs’s writing remains as the site of her ultimate control. But what are the limitations on this medium? Is there a way to acknowledge the moment when the disabled body defies intellectual control without assuming that it compromises the subject’s power? The answer is yes; and it exists in *dance*. A far cry from its classical, image-obsessed roots, there is a world of dance that embraces not only a multitude of bodies, but also multiplicity of storylines, identities, and themes: Contact Improvisation. Here, the usually segregated worlds of writing and dance are seen for what they really are: terms of communication for voices that might not otherwise be heard.

### Moving Bodies, Moving Words

In this day and age “to dance is a radical act” (LaMothe). Even though the written word has traditionally been heralded as the pinnacle mode of expression, and it certainly is for Mairs, there are certain truths that may not be translated to paper: the “authority” of words “comes from the experiences they express” (LaMothe). When considering the art forms most accepting of disabled bodies, dance has typically been left out of the question—and for good reason. Classical dance, such as ballet, worships an impossible ideal of bodily perfection, often at the expense of the dancers’ wellbeing. However, Contact Improvisation (CI) is on the opposite end of the spectrum: with no ideal body to sensationalize, it exists only for the freedom of dancers and audiences alike. A far cry from ballet, this “casual” dance form “emphasizes the release of the body’s weight,” and is far more concerned with “the experience of internal sensations and the flow of the movement between two bodies” (Albright 84) than with controlled perfection.

According to Albright, a dancer-theorist who “enjoys making academics dance and dancers write” (216), the boundaries we erect between these two modes of expression are not as legitimate as we take them for. The structure—or lack thereof—of Contact mirrors the open-endedness of *Plaintext*, and like Mairs’s writing, “redefines the body” by forcing us to see it as “a body in process, a body *becoming*” (Albright 76). Many of Albright’s descriptions of CI praise it for “radically restructuring the traditional frames of dance representation” (64), deconstructing the expectation that dance exists in and for a proscenium stage-bound narrative. Where most classical dance forms revolve around linear storytelling, CI is concerned with the “dancers’ ongoing experience” (86): with no clear beginning or end to the movement dialogue created, it accommodates the “ever-changing flux of bodies” (76) in a way that is true to reality. The improvisation at the

heart of Contact forms a strikingly similar parallel to Mairs's description of her life trajectory; because "one never finishes adjusting to MS" (Mairs 19), she never attempts to present her experience as anything other than a "work-in-progress, a process of *becoming* rather than an immutable fact of physicality" (Mintz 4, emphasis mine). Mairs's essays present structural disjointedness that mirrors the unpredictability of the "pain, altered shape, and loss of function and mobility" (Mintz 26) contained in her disease, and furthermore, "force a continual renegotiation of the nature of self and selfhood" (26). Just as her textual inventiveness allows this negotiation to be realized, Contact demands that its subjects navigate the instability of adapting to each and every moment. Any veteran of the dance form could relate to Mairs's disclosure that she "know[s] what it is like to exist from minute to minute" (Mairs 140).

Though she might not consider herself a dancer, and finds solace in the fact that her "predilections were already solitary, sedentary, and bookish" (Mairs 12) prior to her diagnosis with MS, Mairs's prose is full of movement. Despite any physical limitations she might have, she describes herself "in a graceful pose, my head thrown back" (152) and often gives descriptions of her surroundings that beg to be translated to bodily gesture, such as the "slow motion" of a day that melted by as though she were "under water" (126). When identifying herself as a "cripple," she says, "I swagger" (9). This verb carries a distinct energy with it, and would be fascinating if transferred to dance. In fact, it often is: because Contact "privileges a willingness to take physical and emotional risks" (Albright 85) over technical virtuosity, it has long been inclusive of bodies of all abilities. Since the 1980s—perhaps as a result of a growing intersection between disability and the arts (Albright 86)—Contact has focused on exploring the possibilities

presented by physically disabled and ailing bodies, and has used the expanded movement vocabulary to “refuse the known, the easy habit, the well-traveled path” (86). Because those living with Cerebral Palsy—or in Mairs’s case, MS—can be taxed by even the simplest gestures, each expansion upon their movement necessarily springs from the type of fearlessness that Contact holds in high esteem. Far from being excluded from dance, in the world of Contact Improv, those living with disabilities are seamlessly folded into the group; and like every other dancer, regardless of ability, they are praised for meeting their challenges head on.

#### Staying in Touch: Mutual Reliance

The type of brazenness that Contact Improv encourages is mirrored in Mairs’s use of language. Just as improvisational dancing provides a forum for dancers of all abilities to exert their creative voice, Mairs finds the authority to express hers in life writing—and just as she desires for her audience to squirm at her honesty, Contact enforces the “willingness to feel intensely awkward and uncomfortable” (Albright 87). While Mairs’s writing destabilizes the binary between dis/ability, the “continuum of abilities” (Albright xxv) at the heart of Contact makes it the site of “certain psychic disorientation in which the seemingly stable categories of able and disabled become dislodged” (85). However, at the place where dance achieves its revolution through principles of touch and weight sharing, the parallel to Mairs appears to halt. In both the physical and metaphorical sense, Mairs “hate[s] to be touched,” because she considers it to be one and the same with being “known” (*Plaintext* 87)—she resists letting people get close to her because it runs the “risk” of others “touching the inner workings of your life, not merely your body” (88).

Still, part of Mairs's position as an unreliable narrator—and part of the space left open between individual essays—is that we often realize things that she does *not*; in this case, that the very act of writing her life is allowing us to touch her world. While she is able to maintain a critical distance by putting her experiences into *words*, to be read at a later date, she is unabashedly describing her most intimate moments; whereas in *Contact*, an emotional distance may be maintained where a physical one never can. Perhaps this is the most significant difference between the two formats of expression: that the source of the disability, whether it manifests in a more physical or intellectual manner, dictates the shape that its catharsis must take. In any case, the line between writing and dancing is far less distinct than traditional generic distinctions have made it out to be: like most of the binaries that swarm at the heart of disability studies, it is overly simplistic, and deserves to be disrupted.

Despite her qualms, it is interpersonal touch itself that rescues Mairs: in “On Touching By Accident,” she explains how an unexpected visitor to her house—“a figure [that] danced out of the darkness...and pleaded, ‘Oh, can I use your bathroom?’” (Mairs 23)—halts her preparations to commit suicide. The dialogue that begins with this capricious interruption engages her in a relationship—much like the moment-to-moment interactions of CI—which ultimately saves her life. When referencing the most challenging eras of her life, Mairs writes that she “can trace the progress of my therapy and my satisfaction with it through my attitude toward [my daughter] Anne and my duties to her” (146). It is this sense of dependency, by no means separate from Mairs's position as a feminist, which “offers itself as a new departure for feminist political theorizing”(Butler 196): empowerment need not be “trapped within the unnecessary

binarism of free will and determinism”(201). Though Mairs’s physical state demands her reliance on others, it is her emotional wellbeing that is rescued—and strengthened—when she gives, and bears, the weight of others. Mairs posits herself as a fiercely independent, authoritative narrator; however, her interactions with others are what truly define her. This interdependence—both in and in-between the lines of *Plaintext*—is what makes Mairs an essential voice in women’s life writing, as well as a critical partner to the subject of my next chapter: Lucy Grealy.

## CHAPTER TWO

Lucy Grealy: *Autobiography of a Face*

*“Mirror, mirror on the wall... who is the fairest one of all?”*

If only the evil queen had been satisfied with the answer, Snow White would have led a much less eventful life. Though reality rarely gives us the chance to interact with enchanted mirrors, the plight of *Snow White*'s queen implies a familiar scenario: in modern-day America, we come face-to-face with our faces at every turn, and often trust these reflections to present us with an accurate evaluation of our embodied selves. In what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls an "ocularcentric era" (qtd. in Mintz 49), more emphasis is currently placed on the visual than ever before—and mirrors, whether in the shellacked window of a storefront or the gaze of a stranger, can be both a blessing and a curse.

For the late Lucy Grealy, author of *Autobiography of a Face*, mirrors take on myriad roles. On the one hand, they represent what she is most afraid of—a reflection of her face, the site of more than thirty failed attempts at jaw reconstruction—yet they also generate possibility, making up the "textual hall of mirrors" inherent in life narrative, "in which the narrated object is also a gazing subject" (Mintz 50). Just as a hall of mirrors casts images back and forth in an endless dialogue, autobiography presents a similar lack of unity: the subject writing is also the object being stared at, presenting the self as a multifaceted being that reclaims agency through language. Grealy is used to being the focus of attention, but through the medium of writing, she looks *outward*—rewriting, "literally reconfig[ing]" (Mintz 19) her relationship to her face—creating a moment "in which we may recognize our own bodies, our own contingent selves" and therefore "reappraise the meaning of what [we] see" (50). Grealy uses her position as the author of her own story—the visionary with the potential to re-vision the way she is evaluated—to forge a mirroring in which her gaze is the only one that counts. Furthermore, because her

face in the mirror does not match up with her internal sense of self, Grealy reveals the unreliability of vision as a portal into reality; she complicates the idea that external appearance reflects the spirit or self. By the end of her narrative, Grealy assures the reader that she has abandoned all mirrors as a reliable source of evaluation—that is, all except for one.

Lucy Grealy's relationship with Ann Patchett, an acclaimed novelist, goes beyond the typical limitations of identity: throughout Patchett's description of their bond, which she details in *Truth and Beauty: A Friendship*, their voices intertwine to the point where one woman's story is virtually inseparable from the other. Though Grealy often demands that Patchett act as a mirror, repeatedly asking her to confirm her appearance and accomplishments, the relationship between the two is more akin a pane of clear glass: though space exists between their two stories, it is translucent. Their experiences overlap in crucial ways; and in *Beauty*, published years after Grealy's death, Patchett fills in gaps left open in *Face* and honors their mutually dependent relationship. This textual relationality not only suggests that identity is mutable, a theme that reoccurs throughout Mairs's and Grealy's text, it also challenges the notion of in/dependence altogether; even though "independence" is linguistically modified to be the opposite of dependence, the two states are far from mutually exclusive. Though disability and illness often expedite the process, this chapter will build upon the idea that we are all dependent on human connection; and that by virtue of their interconnected lives—and texts—Grealy and Patchett suggest a new way of looking at autonomy in female life narrative.

Lucy Grealy: Language and the Mindbody



At the age of nine, Lucy Grealy's life was changed by a kickball game: a classmate slammed into her jaw, setting a chain of events into motion that would eventually reveal a diagnosis for Ewing's Sarcoma, a rare form of cancer. In the fifteen years following, Grealy underwent more than thirty reconstructive surgeries—at times, losing more than one-third of her jaw—and a host of related health problems, all of which she discusses with candor in *Face*. She uses the space of her text as a forum for reversing social dynamics, speaking with authority on matters that she is uniquely qualified to address; for example, her mixed experience with Western medicine. Though she has a complex relationship to doctors, crediting them as her protectors and companions, she never shies away from describing their often brutal—and misinformed—treatment: not only is she repeatedly misdiagnosed, Grealy states that her doctors are “predictably patronizing” (Grealy 146), that one “hit...just slightly too hard with his reflex hammer” (74), and that—even when she was in agony, and “begged them to stop” (169)—“no one seemed to care very much” (198). By staking her text as a space where she has authority, she complicates the hierarchy that favors doctors and other medical professionals. Furthermore, Grealy also undermines the power dynamic that favors an able-bodied gaze; by refusing to hold back the nasty truth, her authority reverberates off the walls of a forum—writing, and art in general—that has historically been orchestrated around the aesthetically pleasing. At times, Grealy's story is far from pleasing; and when non-disfigured readers are made uncomfortable, their power is compromised.

Like Grealy's life, *Autobiography of a Face* is a text full of paradox. In addition to her inconsistent view of doctors, she often changes her mind about solitude; while she states that she relishes time spent unaccompanied, Patchett reveals about Grealy that “the

simple act of being alone was nearly impossible” (Patchett 114) for her. Secondly, though Grealy ends *Face* with a vow to avoid gazing in every reflective surface that surrounds her, the title of her text itself speaks to the fact that her face is at the center of her concept of self. She blames it for every problem that arises in her post-cancer life—telling us that she “*was my face, I was ugliness*” (Grealy 7)—yet at the same time, declares that she is never able to fully identify with it. Her paradoxical relationship to her face both highlights the mutability of the self in relation to the physical body, which is always changing, and emphasizes the vulnerability of Grealy’s voice—she does not have all the answers, nor does she claim to. This messiness, far from undermining her story, lends it an openness that might not be found in a logical, unswerving narrative. Regardless of her oft-changing stance on her face, the reader is able to interpret its all-consuming effect on her self-esteem, and is left to ask questions about American culture: what are the social expectations that recognize the face as the part most directly connected with standards of beauty, and why do they exist? Grealy does not claim to solve this dilemma; however, when she does direct the reader’s attention toward her face—the “deviant” part of her appearance—she “rewrite[s]” her face “as a foundational aspect of her identity rather than a grotesque error to be overcome” (Mintz 19). This results in “a confrontation with cultural mythology,” revealing “the deleterious effects *not* of disease but, rather, of normative attitudes about beauty and identity” 53).

Only four years old when her family immigrated from Ireland, Grealy was born into a way of thinking that romanticized the United States as “something big, a whole way of life, an idea, a piece of magic” (Grealy 33); however, her experience during adolescence compromises this vision. Like the suburban neighborhoods where “house

after house looked exactly like the one next to it, save for the occasional cement deer or sculpted shrub” (2), negative reactions to her face lead her to internalize the idea that “beauty, as defined by society at large, seemed to be only about who was best at looking like everyone else” (187). Contemplating the moments that contributed to this realization, Grealy tells her reader: “Society is no help. It tells us again and again that we can most be ourselves by acting and looking like someone else, only to leave our original faces behind to turn into ghosts that will inevitably resent and haunt us” (222). Though this notion plagues Grealy for most of her life, and she comes to associate physical beauty with the sole purpose of attracting men (187), she only questions the forces that put this idea in place in a roundabout way. While American culture places an inordinate amount of attention on *all* physical beauty—telling the general public that it is only a pluck of the eyebrow, a box of teeth-whitener, and a four hundred dollar pair of jeans away from looking and feeling stellar—most attention is placed on *facial* beauty, especially for women. Grealy is more than aware of this fact, convinced that “the anguish of an anomalous face surpasses all other forms of injury or difference” (Mintz 57) when it comes to attractiveness. Even when her hospital roommate loses both of her breasts, and feels she has lost her femininity, Grealy has “no patience with her lament”; the woman still has a husband, something Grealy is convinced that she herself will never have. This solidifies her “conviction of the importance in this world of having a beautiful face” (Grealy 168).

Because she is *in* her lived experience, Grealy has difficulty separating it from the social conventions affecting her woes. Looking in, we have the opportunity to see what Grealy sometimes cannot: that her interaction with the world is not only subject to, but

*shaped* by social attitudes toward beauty and difference. Seeing these conventions at work, we are able to question their naturalization: despite the fact that the media spews single-note presentations of facial beauty, there is nothing innate that demands we react to difference in a negative way. *Face* leaves us with a heightened awareness of this fact, and reminds us that—whether the case is as extreme as Grealy’s or not—difference is an inherent part of life, and it is our responsibility to respect it.

The many negative responses to Grealy’s face reinforce this point by providing a contrast. Throughout the text, the gaze of strangers—usually rooted in ignorance—manifests in cruelty: young children are unafraid to call her a monster, and at one point, a group of older men drunkenly shout that she looks like a dog. According to Cohen’s *Monster Theory*, these reactions are evident of a *sameness* found within the Other’s physical abnormality; something in the aberrance reminds onlookers of themselves, and spurs them to lash out. This certainly affects Grealy: even when she is cancer free, she feels that her misshapen jaw “cancels out” (Grealy 157) the rest of her face and body, even the parts that she deems resolutely “sexy” (207). This causes her to seek surgery even when it is not medically warranted—a detail that “enriches feminist inquiry” by blurring the line between reconstructive and cosmetic procedures, revealing “both [as] efforts to normalize bodies by eradicating difference”(Mintz 6).

In the same way that it is a forum for reclaiming authority over her body, Grealy’s text, like Mairs’s, is a testament to its author’s ability to handle even the worst situations with humor. Though she often feels hopeless, Grealy sees “some comic aspects to [her] predicament” (199), and—also similar to Mairs—deliberately uses unexpected language to allow room for a reconsideration of the situation at hand. For example, when a friend

at school asks whether she is dying, Grealy responds “in the tone of voice I’d have used if she’d asked me whether I was the pope” (121). This humor demonstrates her ability to reframe the direness of what is happening to her: she even relays that she was “fascinated” by the pain she experienced, and describes “how strangely peaceful [she] felt” (16) while it was occurring. She also reveals her awareness that “normally I’d have no reason to ‘feel’ my body or know it so intimately” (91). By steering clear of the maudlin vocabulary often used to describe illness and death, Grealy encourages a reconsideration of spoken language as the ultimate communicator of truth.

Grealy plays with the ambiguity of language, questioning its power: “Language supplies us with ways to express ever subtler levels of meaning,” she states, “but does that imply language *gives* meaning, or robs us of it when we are at a loss to name things?” (44). She points out the double meaning contained in specific words, such as *stroke*—which may signify a caress or a paralyzing episode, depending on context. Years after her initial diagnosis, when she finally hears the word “cancer” uttered in conjunction with her experience, everything changes; up until that point, the reality of her situation had been “couched in jargon” (46) that masked its severity. This raises a crucial point, especially regarding disability and illness as a category of identity: how much stigma, how much stress, is caused by the simple fact that we grope for words to describe our worlds, to recognize our fears and desires and make them tangible, when certain experiences lie beyond the realm of spoken language?

Grealy is aware of the cultural importance of words, and the fact that they are often granted permission to label the world. However, she uses this potential limitation as a solution: “because the violence of cultural bias is deployed through language, it can be

rewritten” (Mintz 66). Words, whether in the context of a diagnosis or a cruel comment made by a classmate, contributed greatly to Grealy’s internalization of inadequacy—without them, she may not have believed so firmly in her deviance. It is language that leads to what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls the “formal rather than functional” (57) aspect of her disability—meaning that it was “a disability constructed totally by stigma and cultural meanings” (54). Though this is a controversial distinction that I will return to later, it draws attention to an interesting fact: because language was the hand by which she suffered, it is the very tool that Grealy uses to fight back. Rather than leave her story up to the hordes of doctors speaking about her in the third person, or to anyone who represents an experience of disability or illness without first walking and seeing from that perspective—*regardless* of whether that walking or seeing is done in a conventional manner—she tells it herself, exactly as she wants it. This complicates the one-sided “stare” dynamic in which passersby gawk at Otherness in a moment of “simultaneous desire and repulsion,” having seen something of themselves within the “monster” (Cohen 16): by the very act of writing her own text, Grealy sends the gaze back *outward*—rather than look away, as she is expected to do, she stares back. By writing the truth of their experiences as only they know it, in texts as equally hybrid as their own “monstrous” selves, Grealy and Mairs go against the cultural expectation that they “mask” behaviors that would “disturb the public” (Linton 152): and in doing so, challenge the idea that they are monstrous in the first place.

“Only the life narrator knows the experience of traffic rushing toward her and makes an interpretation of that situation” (Smith & Watson 5): and accordingly, Grealy tells her story on her own terms, using the vocabulary she has developed “to name [her]

own private losses” (Grealy 52). This is the ultimate act of empowerment; as Patchett puts it, Grealy “claimed complete ownership of her history. It was her world and she would present it the way she wanted to” (Patchett qtd. in Grealy 231). Grealy does more than just *remember* the events of her life and relay them in yet another heartbreaking testament about the trials and tribulations of illness; ““I wrote it,”” she insisted. “I’m a writer” (Grealy 231). There is a chasm between the simple act of relaying information and creating art, and by rooting herself in the latter category, Grealy expands the place of disability and illness memoirs in the grand scheme of life writing—taking them out of the realm of “victim art” and securing their rightful place amongst other memoirs. According to Patchett, Grealy’s form of life writing represents “flecks of gold panned out of [the] great, muddy river” (232) that is life. “This is why the writer matters,” Patchett tells us. “[Grealy] was making art, not documenting an event” (231).

While it is easy to agree with the assertion that Grealy’s disability was primarily superficial, especially considering the social norms that told her she was defective, the reality is not so simple; between the radical operations (at one point, removing an entire bone from her leg) and chemotherapy, Grealy spent a considerable amount of time in extreme pain that left her unable to function. The physical discomfort, however, was “rather easy compared to the sort of emotional assault of guilt and shame that [she] was continuously throwing upon [her]self” (Patchett 136). This suggests that the line between “formal” and “functional” disability, as Garland-Thompson labels them, is not as solid as might be desired for the purpose of easy categorization. Grealy’s example demonstrates the fact that the functional often comes as a result of the formal, and vice versa. They are inseparable. Even when Grealy’s cancer is in remission, she suffers from extreme

*dis/ease*—the effects of which are often more immobilizing than all the hours she spent in a hospital. As a child, Grealy is aware of the dichotomy between bodily pain and emotional ordeal; in fact, the “physical drama seemed a bit of light relief” (Grealy 26) because “if nothing else, [it] was honest and open—you knew exactly what you were dealing with” (90). Compared to her feelings of inadequacy and shame for “failing not to suffer,” Grealy states, “the physical pain seemed almost easy” (90).

As though in a vacuum created by the lack of corrective treatments, the latter half of Grealy’s life was spent battling severe depression: but just as her jaw caused her mental anguish, her depression manifested itself in corporeal means as well. Patchett’s text provides for an increased understanding of this connection in her description of Grealy’s “scorching bouts of depression,” which she says “would regularly roll her into a little ball and *paralyze* her” (Patchett 42, emphasis mine). Even though Grealy’s time spent physically paralyzed in a hospital bed was limited, her depression often became so overwhelming that she “couldn’t move” (77). Her vocabulary is often rooted in the physical as well: at times, she is “churning and shrinking” (Grealy 185) within her skin, and feels “fear’s physical rush swelled inside [her]” (143). Compared to the physical procedures—after which she was usually up and about, bounding and dancing long before recommended by hospital staff—the “stupor of grief” (Grealy 163) that accompanies her loneliness is the most debilitating aspect of her illness, despite the fact that depression is not socially recognized as a disability.

What her text does, then—and what her fearlessness in describing her depression achieves—is a reversal of the typical mind/body dichotomy established in literature and in social contexts. When physical illness and depression accompany one another, as they



do for Grealy and Mairs, they shine a light on the fluid boundary between issues of the mind and body: one is often the impetus of the other, and they continue back and forth in dialogue. In *Face*, Grealy reverses typical assumptions about her disability by stating the “overwhelming attacks of shame” (185) are, in fact, what prevent her from leading a normal life. A more accurate recognition of disability in the social sphere must acknowledge this emotional and physical entwinement, or it will fail to be comprehensive. “It’s one thing to ignore your arm or your stomach,” she reveals, “but ignoring your head isn’t quite so simple” (Grealy 91). Grealy adds to the voices calling for a more complete acknowledgment of disability—and life, for that matter—that seeks not to separate the stomach from the head in the first place, but instead, asks how the two inform one another.

Even admirers of Grealy’s work fall into the trap of separating her mind from her body, representing a recurring issue in reviews of artwork that deals with disability and/or illness. Rather than judge *Face* for its artistic merit, the *Detroit Free Press* applauds Grealy for creating a “powerful testament to the triumph of the human spirit.” Even given her statement that “the body is a connected thing” (56), *Mademoiselle* also praised Grealy for the way she “compensates—and ultimately overcomes—with wit, intelligence, and unconquerable spirit.” This begs the question: what is she overcoming? Even though Grealy survived dozens of trips beneath the surgical knife, to suggest that she bypassed the toil on her body—particularly concerning its effect on her mental wellbeing—denies the very heart of her story, which “suggests that thinking in terms of ‘twoness’ at all—of ‘body’ and ‘mind’ as discrete, if connected, entities—falsely separates what are interpenetrating and constitutive aspects of self” (Mintz 52). Patchett follows up on this

point, reiterating once and for all that “the last thing [Grealy] saw herself as, the last thing she wanted to be, was the poster girl for the human spirit” (Patchett 230). One of the main revelations that Patchett grants in *Truth and Beauty* is the fact that Grealy’s mental strength, her “spirit,” was often broken as a result of outside influences. Generally, in life writing surrounding disability and illness, the “body read as broken becomes a measure of both social value and strength of character or spiritual worth” (Mintz 59). But when such qualities are emphasized at the expense of embracing the corporeality inherent in every story, a dangerous dichotomy occurs. By questioning this binary between mind and body, Patchett and Grealy’s works—particularly when viewed in light of one another—open up a more truthful way of looking at autobiography: as a story composed of more than one perspective, more than one self, and unquestionably rooted in the body.

### Relationality

The concept of relational autobiography, a term coined by Susan Stanford Friedman in 1985, is of particular relevance to my analysis of Grealy and Patchett. In *Reading Autobiography*, relational autobiography is one of fifty-two categories—not including sub-categories and themes—that Sidone Smith and Julia Watson credit with comprising the various forms of life narrative. According to the two authors, the early modern period in the West, the historical crux of autobiography, was a moment intent on “celebrat[ing] the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story” (Smith & Watson 3); stories written by the individual for his or her own “self-interested” evaluation of the “status of the soul” (2) achieved great popularity. In the years since, postmodern theorists have begun to discuss the inadequacy of “autobiography” not only

to capture the reality of lives, but also the complexity of the “individual” that seeks to describe them. No longer preoccupied with a fiction of the self as a cohesive, static entity, concepts of autobiography have expanded to encompass a host of new possibilities, one of which is the idea of relationality. The first relation in question exists between reader and writer: because life is a process, not a “true-or-false story,” communication occurs within the text that bridges both parties in an “intersubjective exchange...aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life” (Smith & Watson 13). This is especially true of Greal, who—far from writing her text merely for others to find connections to their own pain and misfortune—addresses issues that drive readerly reconsideration of social norms, and pushes awareness of the cultural moment in which the story takes place.

It is the second type of relationality, however, that truly makes a difference in understanding Greal’s impact on autobiographical narrative. Over the course of a lifetime, we all encounter “significant others...those whose stories are deeply implicated” in our own, and through whose stories we understand our formation and transformation (Smith & Watson 65). To call an autobiography the story of a singular, untouched life would be overly simplistic and ignorant of the fact that “no ‘I’ speaks except as and through its others” (Smith & Watson 67). While it is crucial that Greal tell her own story, reclaiming agency out of a “cultural script” (42) that constantly demeans her, Patchett offers a supplementary perspective in *Beauty*. At times, Patchett writes between the lines of Greal’s story—augmenting her friend’s testament until she “blurs the line between auto- and biography”—and at others, she offers a new set of eyes that is able to

detach, comment, and dig into the “dynamic recognition” that makes “identity...necessarily relational” (Smith & Watson 66, 202).

Relationality in autobiography is a critical departure away from the idea of the autonomous individual, because it describes women’s life narratives as “interdependent and identified with a community...[capturing] a sense of shared identity” that “exists in tension with a sense of their own uniqueness...[across] fluid boundaries between self and an Other or others” (Smith & Watson 201). Greal, already an Other by societal standards, relies on Patchett both physically and emotionally; she asks her friend to cradle her self-esteem when she is crumpled on the floor, and leaps into her arms each time they see each other, indicating that Patchett “was to hold her for as long as she wanted to stay” (Patchett 6). Extending the Aesop’s fable regarding the relationship between a grasshopper and ant, Patchett infuses *Truth and Beauty* with a golden metaphor of what it is like to be in a mutually dependent—yet balanced—friendship. For Patchett, Greal is *another* from whom she can expand her own identity; like the ant in the Aesop’s fable, she relies on the grasshopper to bring the “truth and beauty to the party” (20). And yet, unlike most people, she never makes Greal into an *Other*—in fact, whenever she sees her friend, she says it is akin to returning to her native country (216). Patchett almost exclusively describes their combined effort, both as friends and as writers who “volley ideas back and forth until neither of us was sure who belonged to what” (22), using the pronoun “we”; for all intensive purposes, they are inseparable. She writes:

Our friendship was like our writing in some ways. It was the only thing that was interesting about our otherwise very dull lives. We were better off when we were together. Together we were a small society of ambition and high ideals. We were tender and patient and kind. We were not like the world at all (73).

For the two women, writing is daily bread, their precious way of interacting with the world—so to extend it to one another in a selfless exchange demonstrates their interconnectedness. Not only does Grealy act as a voice inside Patchett’s head, dictating what she should and should not do, her medical traumas affect her friend in severe, often physical means; Patchett loses sleep, weight, and even neglects a case of hives in order to be by her friend’s bedside. “Lucy and I were one another’s history” (155), she says. When *Truth and Beauty* was published in 2004, two years after Grealy’s death, author Joyce Carol Oates praised the novel not as a solo, but as “an inspired duet.”

### Performing the Autobodyography

*We are always fragmented in time, taking a particular or provisional perspective on the moving target of our pasts, addressing multiple and disparate audiences. Perhaps, then, it is more helpful to approach autobiographical telling as a performative act.* (Smith & Watson 47)

Relationality, or the idea that individual stories are always woven into others, does more than just provide for a more comprehensive picture of life: it implies that the “I” within that story is variable and elastic (Smith & Watson 65). Over the course of one day, every person cycles through a progression of identities—those related to gender, career, nationality, and education, to name a few—categories that, by the very nature of their diversity, hold the potential to conflict with one another (33). “Because of this constant placement and displacement of ‘who we are,’” Smith and Watson argue, “we can think of identities as multiple and as ‘contextual, contested, and contingent” (33). One of the most significant shifts in viewing identity has been the realization of the discursive self; no “I” exists except in and through the interactions, language, and history surrounding its construction, defying the fiction of any unified self (Smith & Watson 47).

They continue, “The stuff of autobiographical storytelling, then, is drawn from multiple, disparate, and discontinuous experiences and the multiple identities constructed from and constituting those experiences” (35). In Grealy’s case, these are represented through her entwinement with Patchett and the daily negotiation of her own multifarious identities.

Though life writing surrounding disability and illness is not the only category that draws attention to the fiction of a coherent self, it magnifies it. Societal norms have traditionally sought to jam the spectrum of ability into an overly simplistic, universal definition for the purpose of categorization. Grealy, however, calls for a different kind of universality; she wants people to understand things about themselves by reading her story, but not at the expense of understanding the specificity bound up in her multipart identity. Her relationality with Patchett is not the only area where her identity is splintered beyond the “monolithic categories that have culturally identified [her]” (Smith & Watson 109): she also inhabits a variety of roles throughout her life, and performs them with gusto—drawing attention to the way we perceive identities, and how they are most accurately depicted in autobiography.

In the course of one lifetime—and occasionally, in the course of one day—Grealy adopts characteristics of a charming invalid, humble martyr, glamorous hospital patient, tomboy, outsider, tortured poet, and hyper-sexualized bombshell. Sometimes her role-playing is an effort to appease her internal image of how she should behave; however, her costumed changeability often occurs at the prompting of others. For example, each time she plays the “role of sick child” with meek acceptance, which she muses would make her “an equally good fascist or religious martyr” (Grealy 30), it is out of an effort to protect her mother and impress her doctors. While it is understood that “both the unified

story and the coherent self” are “myths” surrounding every identity (Smith & Watson 47), this lack of unity is especially relevant for Grealy: after all, her face—the center of her text and her attention—is constantly in flux. Its appearance changes so drastically throughout her lifetime that it is impossible for her to identify with an image of what it looks like—so much so that she identifies her mirrored reflection as an “imposter” (Grealy 220). The fact remains, however, that Grealy writes her autobiography *of* her face—in her opinion, she “*was* [her] face” (7)—therefore, it must be the *change* itself that she identifies with. This point is crucial: not only do the various roles that Grealy adopts deny “our hold on any single, essential ‘Lucy,’” but her face’s steady state of change—ironically, the only constant—allows her story itself to be “unexpectedly mobile, available to new meanings, revisable” (Mintz 66).

Though each and every self is diverse, the unpredictability inherent in living with illness and/or disability amplifies the moment-to-moment nature of navigating this multiplicity. In Grealy’s case, she not only lives her identities, she also *performs* them. Even before the accident that revealed her cancer, Grealy’s persona was dominated by a desire to be noticed—so much so that the initial attention she gains from her medical treatments makes her feel like the “principal player” (Grealy 20) in a “great adventure, the star of my own television special” (26). Throughout her narrative, she regularly adopts the position of an outsider looking in at the drama of her situation; “even as I was aware of my own overblown melodrama,” she writes, “I took a strange comfort in this romantic, tragic role” (182). This observational quality grants an air of performance to her role-playing, making her at once the person who enacts the identities and the one who “witnessed [her] life unfolding like someone who has awkwardly stumbled in after the

movie has started” (Grealy 129). Furthermore, she is dependent on an audience to grant meaning, stating that “their approval or disapproval defined everything” (4). During the long afternoons spent alone in her house, Grealy questions whether the events unfolding around her would carry the same meaning in her absence. Because she is the subject of visual scrutiny, the “visually theatrical aspect of self-writing” provides her with a forum to revise the audience-performer interchange exactly as she sees fit, “enabling the (potentially endless) performance of new identities” (Mintz 50). This is not to say that her performance is unproblematic—it is not. At times, the performance of her face as the center of her self—as the title indicates—and periodic distancing from it becomes dizzying, and potentially compromises her reader’s trust. However, the very fact that Grealy is consciously performing, enabling “the fluid possibilities of identity” (Mintz 65), restores agency to situations where she might otherwise be helpless; she may be an unreliable narrator, but she is a powerful one.

As Patchett demonstrates, Grealy is dependent on a real-life audience to confirm her self-worth; additionally, she “invite[s]” the gaze of her readers “only to invalidate the power of the ableist stare” (Mintz 49). By staring *back*, consciously performing her multiple identities, she invites others to “reconsider normative presumptions” (49) surrounding what they experience. Reminiscent of Butler’s theory of performativity, Smith and Watson explain, “the interiority or self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an *effect* of autobiographical storytelling” (Smith 143). Essentially, no *I*—nor multiple *I*’s, nor the eyes that study them—exist prior to the performance in which they are “produced and reiterated”; always in process, always “unstable” (143).



This instability is at the heart of the performance metaphor, both in the literal interpretation of the word—as it applies to performing arts—and in the sense that it contributes toward the ever-shifting, indescribable nature of memoir. In actual theatrical production, the process is what is valued; any shakiness or uncertainty is understood to be part of the experience. Similarly, the act of “writing oneself onto the stage of one’s own narrated life” (Mintz 50) is an erratic one: as Grealy demonstrates, identities are always “fragmented in time” (Smith & Watson 47), overlapping with others, and morphing in and out of sight. Such changeability is not suited for a typical proscenium stage; life’s inherent volatility can only be depicted in a forum that is equally changeable, itself subject to contradiction and fissure. Such is the power of life narrative, a “fashionably postmodern” collection of genres that flex in order to bear the weight of disparate voices, shapes, and stories (Smith & Watson 109).

Debate is constantly swirling around autobiographical truth in memoir; as Grealy demonstrates, there is a fine line between remembering and creating. To address this tension within an already mutable category, Grealy—like Mairs—refuses to follow the typical ebb and flow of plot. Even though her text is largely chronological, it leaves the reader dangling at the end. A far cry from the narrators who return home at the end of the tale—sadder but wiser, with something remarkable to show for their efforts—*Face* is “a circular book, a story whose ending always folds back around to the first page” (Patchett qtd. in Grealy 236).<sup>6</sup> This does not mean that Grealy brings her readers full circle, looping back to the self she introduces on page one; rather, her text is a stage on which

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Grealy and Patchett’s texts themselves overlap to the point where one citation is virtually inseparable from the other: Patchett intersperses *Beauty* with personal letter correspondence between herself and Grealy, and also writes the afterword in *Face*.

she runs in circles, caught in an endless cycle of self-reflection that—despite her hope for change—does not promise to end anytime soon. The importance of this cyclicity is that it is true to life; regardless of disease or disability, the fact remains that reality is unpredictable and often disappointing. Like her life, Grealy's text is dotted with the revisiting and reimagining of past events; "reassembl[ing] various pieces of memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency into new, often hybrid, modes of subjectivity" that "interrogate cultural discourses defining and distinguishing the normative and abnormative body" (Smith & Watson 109, 42).

Of all the common denominators that can be found between identities and their narratives, the fact is that they are all *process*-bound: like Cohen's monsters, they are *hybrids*—constantly in motion, and two steps ahead of the forces that attempt to define them. This "propensity to shift" (Cohen 6) draws attention to another crucial aspect of autobiographical writing: embodiment. The body itself is made up of countless processes, none of which ever cease to be in motion; a fact highlighted, sometimes grimly, in a body ravaged by illness. Writers with disabilities often have to toe a critical paradox between being "somehow nobody and nothing but body, all at once" (Mintz 70): because the body is the site of conflict, and often the impetus for writing, the artistic merit of the piece can be bypassed for its concentration on the physical. This issue has surfaced in some feminist discourses as well which discourage female authors from writing about reproductive or bodily processes on the grounds that it binds them to their corporeal selves.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A primary theme in ENGL 174; "Contemporary Women Writers," Professor Gayle Greene, Scripps College, Fall 2011.

What is interesting, though, is the impossibility of this discouragement: because all writers are embodied by the cultural discourses surrounding them, and the act of writing itself is a physical act, it stands to reason that “memory itself is embodied” (37). As Smith and Watson say, “memories are created as the subject reconstructs a sense of identity while engaging with the world in symbolic exchange. Subjectivity is impossible unless the subject recognizes her location in the materiality of an ever-present body” (38). There can be no “return to the body” in female life narrative or otherwise, because that would imply that one has left it—and in reality, there is always a body that perceives the sensory world and informs the writer as he or she translates experience into narrative, even if the final product is as disjointed as the experience itself. In fact, this very quality within Grealy’s autobiographical “manifesto” is what makes it fascinating: seeking “not to guarantee a unified female body but, rather, to keep the ‘story’ of the female body in motion,” it shows “how the ‘truth’ of particular bodies is open to revision” (Mintz 68). The intellectual aspect of autobiography cannot be considered at the expense of the corporeal when, in fact, the two are inseparable. Whether the narrative deals with the immediate deterioration of the physical body is irrelevant; the text, because it was produced by a body, is also necessarily an autobiography of that body—an *autobodyography*. The impact of life writing by women with disabilities is that—because their bodily fluctuations are often magnified—their ability to articulate this universal experience is heightened as well.

By admitting that the face she sees does not correspond to the *self* that she knows, Grealy highlights the disconnect between mirrors and truth; just as her face undergoes countless transformations, her identity is fragmented into a variety of masks to be

adorned. No matter how pristine the glass, no one reflective surface can capture the multifarious, transitory nature of the self; however, the forum of life narrative—a stage that Grealy uses to “slip in and out of her various personae with great ease, even flair” (Grealy 38)—captures the movement inherent in life. The theatricality contained in the performance of morphing identities, at once able to be contained within a text and completely uncontrollable, is like a hall of mirrors that blurs the line between the “I” staring, watching itself being stared at, and staring back out.

Though it is contained between two covers, Grealy herself admits that at times, her writing feels like “a performance piece, something in which the act of doing both equaled and surpassed the notion of a single moment in which a piece is ‘completed’” (Grealy qtd. in Patchett 205). Though the type of performance that Grealy hints at is a metaphorical one, she opens up an interesting question: what new ways of representation, perhaps lost in autobiography’s hall of mirrors, can be found in physical performance? According to Smith and Watson, visual artists “can place the material body in the picture in order to make embodiment visible” (75). Just as language can be used to fight back in a sphere where words are used as the means for oppression, it should be possible to use this ocularcentric society’s weapon against itself: and what better way to combat the intensely visual than through a medium which itself is intrinsically visible?

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **Dis/ability and Dance**

The dream of first principles is alive when boundaries are transgressed, and life emerges as movement in itself.

- Petra Kuppers, *Bodies in Motion*

In a contest between spoken language and the larynx, only one is considered to be the carrier of our innermost thoughts and outermost energies; however, how could words exist without a body to articulate them? “Words cannot grant themselves authority,” says Kimerer LaMothe, author of “What a Body Knows.” “There are forms of knowing that cannot be mediated to us in words, which give words their meaning.” These forms are the physical, the corporeal, and the intuitive: and for the body that has been *disabled* by a word that cannot hope to encompass what it claims to describe, physical communication speaks volumes where words cannot. In the case of a body that has been marginalized, the act of reclaiming authority is “particularly effective in a physical context, since we react viscerally to dance and are less able to screen out elements that do not fit into intellectual categories” (Desmond 103).

There’s that word again—*dance*. As an activity, dancing has long been associated with the most able of able-bodies; ballet in particular has been crafted as a forum for tremendous physical control. To enter into this sphere, then, as a body that has been marked as disabled, is a radical undertaking: it challenges ideas of what dance can be, what bodies are capable of, and what social forces have traditionally put dance and disability in separate corners. It is “precisely because the body has been a major site of oppression that it must be the site of the battle to be waged” (Albright 108): to let the body talk, to speak in an organic and sometimes unsettling language that shifts and *moves*—as all living bodies do—denies the fixity disability, exposing the fluid nature of societal labels and of identity itself. What Mairs and Grealy capture through the ebb and flow of their prose is *physically* captured in the form of Contact Improvisation—a revolutionary dance form that not only welcomes difference, but also thrives on it.

Despite the power of words, CI goes where literature cannot: it appeals to an image-obsessed culture by being visible, but by questioning the validity of what can be seen, also undermines the authority of vision. It presents a form that engages the body, mind, and soul simultaneously—making it known that “the visible is only one aspect of the unfolding dimensions of moving” (Kuppers 134).

### Historical Background: The Construction of the Ideal Body

Compared with literature, film, philosophy, and painting, dance—as anything less than an abstract concept—is typically excluded from critical discussions in the Humanities: but according to Norman Bryson, this is more evident of “the quirkiness of academic institutions” (Bryson 75) than a lack of relevance. In fact, Bryson says, dance presents one of the “most interesting vistas for the humanities at the present time” (76): because the body has traditionally been the site upon which social rules are inscribed as well as the medium of their portrayal, to observe the body—particularly, what the ‘ideal’ body is at any given time—is like looking through a keyhole into the social mentality of that historical moment. For example, the inception of ballet coincided with Louis XIV’s reign over the court of Versailles. By making ballet a desirable act, high on the social ladder—and also codifying the art form with a movement vocabulary that favors physically coordinated bodies —Louis XIV ensured that a fit body “formed the basis of courtly self-presentation” (Bryson 62). The ‘ideal’ ballet body that we know, love, and love to hate was constructed not out of recognition of the reality of bodies, but a desire to control a population: “bodily orchestration, discipline, and spectacle” did more than found a burgeoning art form, they were at “the heart of the state apparatus” (Bryson 61).

A body that did not fit into the prized aesthetic represented a threat—it was a body out of state control.

Even without Europe's formal courtly setting, the "frontier mentality" at the root of American culture is based on "a simplistic equation of selfhood with freedom in physical mobility" (Albright 61). Alongside pipe dreams of self-sufficiency, American culture is steeped in capitalistic desires for productivity; and both prize a body that is able to move and do more work. To be free, then, one must not simply be mobile, but also autonomous: capable of self-control, which—not coincidentally—primes the body for being controlled by others. Because of the media's role in disseminating images of what a body 'should' look like, it is easy to forget the political interests behind its construction—but analyzing this impetus "is like an archeological dig into the deep psychic fears surrounding disability" (Albright 58). Today, as "American culture is emphasizing with a passion heretofore unimagined the need for physical and bodily control" (Albright 73), the body that falls outside the parameters of efficient physicality—outside the "aspirations of bourgeois individualism" (Albright 63)—represents transgressions not only of the boundaries of the body, but also of the institution that created those boundaries in the first place.

### Physically Integrated Dance

Though few—and in the case of ballet, hardly any—bodies are able to fit the naturalized ideal, the disabled body, as I have argued, has long represented the pinnacle of Otherness that threatens to destabilize the state apparatus. For this reason, when the

disabled body moves into the role of dancer—a role “historically reserved for the glorification of the ideal body” (Albright 57)—it “stakes claim to a radical space, an unruly location where disparate assumptions collide” (58). Dance forms like ballet, in their “fetishization of control” (Albright 73), represent a fantasy of what the human body is capable of under extreme control: the audience settles comfortably into their seats in front of the proscenium stage, and the lights dim and rise to signal the beginning and ending of the unreality. Not surprisingly, this distinct chasm between performer and audience was also a product of Louis XIV’s reign at Versailles, as well as the improvements in theatrical sound and lighting technology that arose during the period. In this space, the audience typically enters a voyeuristic excursion into the *might-be*—the potential for freakish capability put on display—making it the ideal format for another *might-be*, the possibility of corporeal failure that always looms. According to Janet Wolff, all women—not just those that are affected by disability or disease—are socialized into believing that their bodies are deficient (87). To put said bodies on display, particularly those with outward signs of aging and deterioration, and to present them in a positive light is to reclaim some of the agency that has been compromised by social demands on an unattainable ideal of controlled perfection.

In ballet technique, dancers aspire to make the impossibly strenuous appear effortless—and combined with the proscenium stage and booming sound, the audience is transported through a “fantasy of achievement” (McRobbie 207) and shielded from the strain behind the action. Though some mixed-ability (or physically integrated) dance companies attempt the same effect—arguably to their detriment, which I will address later—others make no attempt to safeguard the audience from the effort behind the dance,



“shattering the illusion of ease and grace by the disruptive presence of fleshy experience—heavy breathing, sweat, technical mistakes, physical injury and even evidence of a dancer’s age or mortality” (Bryson 74). Though not every body is affected by illness, every single body ages, and every single body dies: and by making this fact visible, disabled dancers break the illusion that their bodies are abnormal—and remind audiences that the corporeal possibilities represented may come into anyone’s life at any given time.

By entering an arena that has typically shut them out, disabled dancers force a radical reconsideration of the binaries that excluded them in the first place. By identifying as both “disabled” and “dancer”—which in many cases, is a synonym for “able-bodied”—disabled dancers “confuse non-disabled people’s concepts of what dance can be, what bodies are supposed to do, and what disability means” (Kuppers 68). They “deconstruct the polarization of ability and disability,” pointing out the falsity of that binary, and “challeng[ing] the prevailing vision of professional dance that equates physical ability with aesthetic quality” (Albright 57). Furthermore, when audience members observe dance of any kind, something called “metakinesis” occurs: according to John Martin, “inherent contagion of bodily movement” leads to “sympathy on a muscular level” (Albright xix). By sitting in proximity to the dancers, audience members begin to identify with their specific movement qualities, “kinesthetic reflexes and dynamic momentum” (Bull 283). Suddenly, the taboo is broken: one person’s corporeal experience becomes blurred, and the boundaries separating performer from audience member are problematized. Both disabled and non-disabled parties are encouraged to consider the wall that makes each an outsider to the other, and in doing so, may “find

[themselves] aligning...into new relations with them, relations that might not so easily be categorized as ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’” (Kuppers 3).

However, not all reactions to physically integrated dance have recognized its capacity. In 1994, dance critic Arlene Croce famously coined the term “victim art” in response to Bill T. Jones’s project *Still/Here*, which featured HIV/AIDS patients. Remarkably, without even watching the piece, Croce attacked it for its apparent inattention to the art of dance, saying it focused instead on the turmoil of living with terminal illness—falsely separating the two categories, and assuming that “people who are defined by their bodies are trapped by them” (Kuppers 53). The backlash against Croce was fervent, but the question remained: why did she react with such hostility? Albright would argue that the bodies reminded Croce of her own inevitable bodily failure, but that does not answer the larger question. Croce is by no means the only critic to tackle physically integrated dance, and the more receptive—but no less demeaning—reaction is what Albright calls the “language of astonishment” (79). For example, when a critic watches a man dance without having any legs, they commend his physical and emotional feat with language that “reflects both an evangelistic awakening (yes, a disabled man can swagger!) and traces of a freak-show voyeurism (see the amazing feats of the man with no legs!)” (Albright 79). This approach prevents the art from being measured for its merit, and reinforces the divide between physically integrated dance and classical dance, which—besides presenting different aesthetics—share much more than the word *dance* in common.

Audiences do—or don’t—go to physically integrated performances for a variety of reasons; but when sexual and racial difference take the stage, Cohen’s theory of

“simultaneous repulsion and desire” (Cohen 6) becomes even more relevant toward analyzing audience motivations. In *Embodying Difference*, Jane Desmond explains why Anglo audiences gravitate toward dances that present sexual and racial “Others”: seated safely in the confines of a theatre, audience members are free to experience what is often considered a taboo and risqué way of moving in an arena that is “clearly delimited in time and space” (41). When the lights signal the end of the performance, everyone is free to go home, having gotten to temporarily inhabit an enticingly different world “without paying the social penalty” of actually being of that world (Desmond 37). In the case of physically integrated dance, then, why do audiences watch—if they watch at all? In addition to Martin’s theory of metakinesis and empathy that originates on a cellular level, many dance theorists have argued that audiences watch disabled dance out of a desire to feel better about their own ability—like a dance of sexual or racial provocation, dances of mixed abilities within an enclosed stage allow able-bodied audiences the chance to feel anything from pity to repulsion to desire, while still guaranteeing that they will walk out of the theatre back into a world that favors the able-bodied.

What they do not count on, however, is the fact that disabled dancers are uniquely qualified to hold up a mirror to the audience’s own insecurities and feelings—the gaze is unexpectedly refracted back. Because the body *is* the site of our social histories, and because unlike sex or race (for the most part), the body we have *will* change and deteriorate in its ability over the course of a lifetime, the audience is given insight into their own reality. In physically integrated dance, the audience goes from watching to *witnessing*, “a kind of perceiving (with one’s whole body) that is committed to a process of mutual dialogue” (Albright xxii). Similar to the way that Mairs and Grealy imbue their

readers with the responsibility to reconsider dis/ability, physically integrated dance “raises the stakes of audience engagement”: oftentimes, making audiences uncomfortable and requiring them to *stay* with that discomfort in a meditation of obliterated binaries. Observation is turned into “more than a flat visual gaze,” and instead requires “attending to kinesthetic, aural, somatic, and spatial sensations” (Albright xix).

This phenomenon is heightened even further when the proscenium stage, which creates a natural boundary between performer and observer is abandoned, as it is in Contact Improvisation (CI): suddenly, not only are the binaries between dis/abled and disabled/dancer complicated, but there is no safe observational space to settle into. In CI, the role of audience member becomes “obsolete”: it “pulls the audience in as witness to the ongoing negotiations of *their* [own] physical experience” (Albright 90, emphasis mine) in addition to the experiences unfolding around them.

#### Contact Improvisation: Defiance, Dis-ease, and Expanding Definitions

*The body can relax, let go, take a vacation from trying so hard, or not at all...Follow your partner. Risk the road. Go down the untraveled paths of back or neck. Let bone graze bone. Fall into pools of flesh. Lounge in heat. Drink the elixir of expansion, the release within response...Let your body call you back into yourself, into your most deeply embodied self. Land, dive, soar. Find the crumbs that lead back home.*

- Cheryl Pallant, *Contact Improvisation*

Contact Improvisation is not of this world. At least, it is not of the dance world of ages past—the one that demands that a specific body enact specific movement, under specific circumstances of light and sound. As the above quotation, an introductory exercise to CI, indicates, Contact Improvisation is about following bodily sensations in a mutually dependent dialogue of weight-bearing and exploration of “the mystery of the unfolding movement, not doing, not action, not goal, not even the crafting of beauty”

(Pallant 87). Bodies of all shapes and sizes, all ability levels and all walks of life, are encouraged to “enter a mutually reflexive, living relationship with their surroundings” (27). CI pays tribute to the ever-changing process, the improvisational dialogue that places *touch*—physical and symbolic—at the forefront.

Contact Improvisation is a postmodern dance form based on a rolling point of physical contact between two (or more) dancers, who yield to the momentum of each other’s bodies to create a fluid exchange of weight. Certain elements of CI remain consistent, and the six principles that drive the movement—attitude, sensing time, orientation to space, orientation to partner, expanding peripheral vision, and muscular development—are at the forefront; however, what makes the form so effective is its slipperiness—its unwillingness to be “reduce[d] to a sound bite” (Pallant 74). Though Steve Paxton is credited with starting the form in 1972, he decided not to trademark the work, “preferring ongoing dialog instead” (14). Even today, as CI has gained popularity throughout the professional dance world and has permeated film, television, stage, and therapy sessions alike, “[Paxton] refuses to claim the terrain mapped out by CI as his own. He doesn’t command that only an elite few lead the Contact brigade” (Pallant 14). In stark contrast to ballet, which thrives on institutionalized distribution, codification, and certification, CI spreads primarily by word-of-mouth and collaborative “jam” sessions all over the world. In this way, it is much more than just another jewel in the crown of professional dance—the democratic nature of its founding was “an act with profound personal and societal implications” (Pallant 15).

Of all the dance forms that are—and are not—accommodating toward the full spectrum of dis/abled bodies, CI has a unique capacity for “hierarchical reshuffling”

(Pallant 80). For one, it is based on a *mutual* exchange of touch: there is no clear leader or follower, and the hierarchies surrounding ability, race, class, age, and sexuality melt away. In this “new world of equality,”

...partners can examine given roles and opt to abandon them for a revised relationship...the dance acts as a pyre for burning unwelcome social debris and clearing space for a new social order based on mutual respect and equality.  
(Pallant 80)

Because CI itself is a free-floating entity, the “stage for a new social order” (Pallant 82) that refuses to turn anyone away, every session can produce a partnership that might not otherwise occur—the elderly dance with the young, and someone of lower class may share weight with someone of high economic status, marking one of the “few occasions” where the two may interact “on equal footing” (82). By moving through space together in an environment that fosters trust, ideas of alienation or reckless autonomy—notions at the heart of American culture—disappear, encouraging awareness of the importance of touching and being touched.

Within a culture that “promotes individuality and its unintended byproduct, isolation” (Pallant 5), the act of touching is nothing short of momentous. For one, the type of gentle touch that CI solicits causes boundaries between partners to dissipate; it pokes holes in our armors of self-presentation, “quite literally, keep[ing] us in touch, allowing us to forge necessary connections between ourselves and the other” (97). In the case of a disabled body, which is constantly deemed the societal and corporeal Other, this connection has the potential to erase a lifetime of ignorant judgment. Secondly, touch spurs numerous health benefits: the simple connection of skin-to-skin has been linked to stress relief, the stimulation of the immune system, increased self-awareness, the generation of synaptic links, and profound shifts in energy (97). Drawing on the comment

of masseuse and Trager® practitioner Deane Juhan, who sees our society as “touch deprived and touch phobic, despite innumerable physical and psychological benefits” (96), I believe Contact is key to forming a more comprehensive treatment for physical ailments and disabilities.<sup>8</sup> Especially in a CI setting, which denies that physical connection is solely sexual—reserved for intimate relations—and re-presents it as easy and natural, touch is a necessary step in the rehabilitation of the body and mind. Cheryl Pallant, avid dancer and author of *Contact Improvisation*, who was diagnosed with scoliosis as a young girl, internalized the judgments of others and segregated herself from the dance world until she discovered CI. Besides embracing her curved spine as simply one more facet of her identity, her physical contact with other bodies caused her back spasms to disappear, “the pain vanishing also in subsequent years” (2). Pallant is not the only one to credit CI as much more than a dance form, but also as a system of movement therapy; like the act of being disabled itself, it represents an amorphous, slippery category that impacts the mind *and* body in profound ways.

In CI, the mind and body are never separated: they are fused through the act of touch, and furthermore, through the bodily *listening* that the form demands. In it, “partners pay attention to the ongoing fluctuations of their bodies, from the obvious to the subtle...emotions assert and retreat, and memories emerge and recede, all spilling into movement sequences” (Pallant 32). The emotional history of each individual forms the basis for the movement itself, and likewise, “where the body goes, so too goes the mind” (100). Rather than asking participants to surrender their feelings at the door and mimic a

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<sup>8</sup> The Trager® Method incorporates fundamentals of body-mind integration into massage, using techniques of rocking, shaking, and stretching in order to release habitual tension in the body resulting from blocked energy in the mind.

codified recipe for aesthetic beauty, CI simply asks for surrender—the emotion is contained within the motion, “mind and body inextricably entwined” (17). For this reason, it is not only the ideal format for the physical therapy of bodies affected by illness, injury, or disability, but also an effective forum for those bodies to enter into the dance sphere because it treats the mindbody as a unit—and expands *disability* beyond its societal definition as a primarily physical issue.

Many times, at the beginning of a CI jam, participants will go around and list their individual needs—it is assumed that everyone, regardless of whether their “special need” is their paralyzed legs or their pending divorce, is dealing with specific physical and emotional burdens. Because CI recognizes ability as a “continuum and not as an either/or situation” (Pallant 87), it questions why visible disabilities are more culturally stigmatized. This contrasts greatly with ballet, which—in its delineation of bodily perfection as “the necessary prerequisite” (Bull 272)—has spurned a host of body image related issues, including a culture of severe eating disorders.<sup>9</sup> Ballet companies are notoriously reluctant to acknowledge how deeply these psychological issues impact the physical, because their effects may not be visible to an audience; however, in CI, no such hiding is possible. When a dancer suffers from distorted body image, “only reluctantly do they lean into their partner...the contact remains tentative” (Pallant 51). Body image struggles will easily put a Contacter at greater disadvantage than one who may be “disabled,” but more comfortable with his or her own body as it is.

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<sup>9</sup> This issue, while not easily traceable to one source, has been the subject of intense media scrutiny. For further research, see *Dancing On My Grave*, by Gelsey Kirkland; and more recently, “The Light Fantastic? Ballet Dancers and Anorexia,” by Julia Mackrell (*The Guardian*, 6 February 2012).



To further complicate the issue of dis-ease in dance, as opposed to clinically diagnosed disease, oftentimes the technical virtuosity prized by classical dance forms can “obscure other qualities of [CI], like its ability to communicate or stumble into the realm of novelty and surprise” (Pallant 43). A body that is physically fit may also be “hardened,” demonstrating “little elasticity and receptivity,” leading to a “limited range of listening and motion” (Pallant 104). This negative description of the fit, able body flips the bias typically presented to us, *especially* in the dance world: it breaks the tether between disability and inability, proving the dichotomy is a false one. By the very nature of its process, CI shines new light on dis/ability studies by allowing people with physical limitations—many of whom “[speak] of trusting and loving their body as it [is]” (Linton 63)—to emerge as more able than the bodies dealing with eating disorders or sexual/physical abuse, both of which are “intensely disabling” (62). Says Simi Linton, a disability rights activist and author:

I think we need to develop a more complex and self-critical discussion of physical freedom in order to recognize that the ability to move—anywhere at anytime—does not necessarily equal a true psychic liberty...[paralysis] isn’t necessarily any more personally disempowering than an experience of a body image disorder, even though only one of these people would be considered ‘disabled’ in our society. (63)

Through her experience as a disabled woman and organizer of the Society for Disabled Studies Conference’s wildly popular dis/abled social dance, Linton knows that the only way to make change is to expand beyond a proscenium stage, and out of the movement vocabulary that has deemed dis/ability untranslatable to dance. And according to Pallant, “CI becomes the very vehicle for that change” (Pallant 51).

(Broken) Body Language: A New Vocabulary

The problem with many physically integrated dance companies is that they attempt to conform to an aesthetic that has already been established, only with a different set of bodies—and the performance appears strained as a result. The aesthetic of ballet is exclusive to begin with, focused on “an ethereal presence rather than a real corporeality” (Wolff 95). Therefore, when someone attempts to wheel into the archetype, to fit into a narrow space that is unaccommodating to *most* bodies, the integrity of the disabled body and of the classical form itself are compromised. According to Linton, “if disabled dancers merely mimicked or recapitulated standard dance, albeit in alternative ways, we would not have an impact on the art form called dance” (Linton 152). The only way to do that is to abandon the old vocabulary altogether, and dance in a new language—one that is *better* communicated by a disabled body.

More than any other dance form, Contact Improvisation facilitates this invention. For one, Contacters often *purposefully* work with so-called disabilities: in a jam, closing one’s eyes and making the legs “dead weight,” or simply deciding to work in an alternative plane of movement—on all fours, or with the entire body sprawled on the floor—is considered an opportunity, not a limitation. It is through these restrictions, especially lack of sight, that deeper bodily reflexes and possibilities are accessed—it leads to a heightened sensory awareness and a new way of looking at the world. Some disabled dancers have tapped into the specific beauty of their movement, presenting it as something to be desired; Bill Shannon, for example, uses his crutches to make a “highly sophisticated and complex action out of walking down a flight of stairs...developing this everyday action into a ballet of swoops and falls” (Kuppers 62). It may not be classical ballet, but it is ballet nonetheless—and the only physically integrated companies that

succeed in reframing disability in a positive way are the ones who choreograph using the extraordinary vocabulary exclusive to the bodies they are working with.

Even with the best intentions in mind, many companies that feature disabled dancers—as opposed to CI, which is not compartmentalized into professional companies—do so in a way that is potentially insulting to both audience member and artist. One example is that of Cleveland Ballet Wheels, a well-received company that features Mary Verdi-Fletcher—a paraplegic—as one of its principal dancers. Verdi-Fletcher, who was born with spina bifida, is praised for her dedication to bringing wheelchair dancing into the mainstream—but she does it by replicating the aesthetics that characterize that mainstream. She is described as having the “spark, the spirit” (Albright 66) that make a dancer shine—but in the company’s choreography, this quality is emphasized instead of the unique movements available to her *only because* she is in a wheelchair. In one piece choreographed by Sabatino Verlezza, Verdi-Fletcher is lifted overhead by a male able-bodied dancer, waving her arms in a display of triumph—which “paradoxically reinforces, rather than disrupts, the negative connotations of disability” (Albright 65) by making it appear as though she must be hoisted into the position of “real” dancer, one whose ‘spirit’ doesn’t let the limitations of her body get in the way” (66). It would be different if it were Verdi-Fletcher’s choreography, if she had agency in narrating her disability as she sees it—but as it is, CBW’s orientation of bodies on stage often “seems to invoke all the worst stereotypes of disability in a completely uncritical manner” (Albright 69).

Light Motion, a Seattle-based company under the direction of Charlene Curtiss, edges more toward the disruption that Albright calls for; Curtiss maneuvers her

wheelchair as though it is an extension of her own body, “expanding its legibility as a signal of the handicapped into a sign of embodiment” (Albright 83). Even better, *Candoco*—based in London—utilizes innovative plays with momentum and level changes, exploring the ways that wheelchairs and legs may support and connect with one another. “The choreography refuses the implicit ideology of standing upright by placing most of the movement on the ground” (Albright 80). Still, despite the numerous ways that these companies are working toward revolutionizing perceptions of disability onstage, the fact remains that they are doing it *on a stage*—fencing in “innovations and disportments” that, according to Simi Linton, can “never quite ‘fit’ in the confines of a proscenium stage” (Linton 154).

Where these companies attempt, Contact Improv achieves true progress—without even trying, or acknowledging that it is doing so. It does not make money or win audiences over based on a philanthropic presentation of bodies not typically seen—it simply gives all bodies the clean slate and lack of expectations required for creativity to bloom. Besides DV8, a mixed abilities dance company that uses film as a medium for disrupting the ableist gaze, CI represents a rare opportunity to break out of the boundaries automatically created by an elevated stage. Furthermore, by welcoming all abilities and acknowledging that disabilities are rooted in the psychological as well as physical, CI breaks the trend in physically integrated dance that caters to lower body paralysis—with no aesthetic to aspire toward, the wheelchair is given no more attention than less visible disabilities.

This is particularly relevant next to physically integrated companies: for example, the GIMP project. Despite the many admirable traits of Latsky’s vision, when Helen

O'Neill reviewed the company in 2009, the main focus of her article inadvertently points out a critical trap: she praises the able-bodied dancers for overcoming their emotional setbacks, and the disabled dancers—apparently, more likely to present “raw emotional honesty” (O'Neill 3) because of their condition—for their struggle to keep up with the physicality of the dance. She writes that Jeffrey Freeze, a professional dancer before joining GIMP, was asked “what is YOUR risk?” by audience members—as if his life's emotional and physical hardship would be less trying simply because he had two working legs. In contrast, Contact Improv treats the mind and body as a unit: all dancers are assumed to bring a level of emotional and physical vulnerability to the table, despite their societal position as dis/abled. CI gives space for a new language to develop, one that treats disability and dance in the same sentence—not as two worlds colliding.

Language is an important forum to consider if real change is going to be made; especially considering that “all bodies are limited, disabled by language” (Kuppers 58). Of the plethora of bodily experiences—and identities determined by race, class, sexuality, ability, etc.—we are expected to be able to check the reality of our bodies off in a box that asks whether we are *male* or *female*; *able* or *disable*; *Hispanic*, *black*, or *white*. If that's not debilitating, what is? Forging a new vocabulary that genuinely expands upon the particularities that the disabled body has to offer—and making that vocabulary visible through a medium that embraces it, like Contact Improv—proves that semantic labeling is not set in stone, and neither are the judgments behind them. Proving that language itself is a “ritual machine,” and that the “disabled body isn't the raw matter preceding the fully arrived, evolutionary pinnacle of linguistically communicating ‘normal man’” (86), opens the floodgates of reconsideration: the way we treat dis/ability is constructed, not

innate. By redefining what qualifies as an acceptable body and beautiful movement, CI achieves this opening; and because “language...contains shortcomings, often proving imprecise in capturing the moment-to-moment challenges in movement and consciousness” (Pallant 4), CI relies on bodily communication. “In place of words, the close proximity of bodies sharing weight and skin, bony and soft surfaces, firm and slack muscles all provide an endless stream of information about the physical condition of the dancers and where the dance can go” (Pallant 22). In my experience, when CI partners attempt to consult verbally, it actually causes their muscles to tense in a way that hinders the dance. The social dominance of words is undermined, and in its place, the body is left to speak openly and honestly about its experience.

By the very fact that they are physical, dance and movement have the ability to communicate in a way that “mere language cannot (yet)” (Kuppers 3); they fight the “ocularcentric society” that Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes with their insistent visibility, with the fact that an audience may not so easily tune them out, or place them back on a shelf. We react instinctively to dance, and have bodily reactions to the moments that hit us at our core—the moments where pins and needles crawl up and down our spine—reinforcing the act of witnessing as a physical, not merely intellectual, experience. Dance is essential to my argument because it engages audiences beyond a one-dimensional stare, disrupting the notion of gaze altogether—including the male gaze. The female disabled dancer, by “radically question[ing] the ideal image of a dancer’s physique,” (Albright 57) has the power to fracture the male gaze where even the strongest body cannot. Furthermore, the act of jumping all over the stage—the tactic that Greally and Mairs emulate in their texts by pluralizing identity and rejecting chronology,

respectively—physically represents the jumbled, nonlinear nature of life itself. Even better, a dancer in a wheelchair may evoke the fluid transition between the multiple identities inherent in each life by rolling across the stage; something that she is able to do, not in spite of her disability but *because* of it.

According to Petra Kuppers, a life or a body that has encountered trauma is jolted into paralysis; the current of life is disrupted by an event that is a “moment out of flow” (Kuppers 104), which then repeats in one’s memory like a broken record. To move, then—to dance—represents a unique opportunity around this paralysis, a “flow of energy, and a way of being alive, that negates fixity” (1). It saves the narrative from being weighed down by the paralysis of trauma, whether that rigidity is physical or symbolic. In the case of the former—and the reason why dance is so relevant—“the ambiguous decision to perform one’s body,” to deny the fixity of corporeal trauma, “opens up new chapters for disability narratives—and for dance” (Kuppers 68). Furthermore, because disabled bodies are often treated with overt delicacy—like “precious, breakable doll[s]” (Mintz 15)—the act of dancing, and throwing one’s body around with all the momentum and immediacy that it craves, obliterates the stigma by proving that they do not break.

### Synergy and In[ter]dependence

The written word is not an indisputable authority in relaying the twists and turns inherent in embodiment; however, there are many writers—and Lucy Grealy is among them—who make their words dance, and construct their texts in a way that captures the

movement of storytelling. As I have shown, by the sporadic nature of her storytelling and the “ease” with which she “slip[s] in and out of her various persona” (Greal 38), Greal captures the motion inherent in the decidedly un-unified experience of being alive and demonstrates how the “‘truth’ of particular bodies is open to revision” (Mintz 68). If her life story were to be captured in dance, it would be a Contact Improvisation. For one, she reflects upon the singular and “fleeting...nature of all moments,” (Greal 86) which is fundamental to any improvisational form. In CI, all movements are understood on this basis; the “smooth or bumpy course of the dance” is given room to unfold because dancers are encouraged to meditate on the fact that circumstances are constantly shifting—“it’s just that some motion is more visible and active than others” (Pallant 48). CI leaves no room for anticipation, which is particularly relevant considering Greal’s relationship to time: despite her awareness of the present moment, she consistently “postpones happiness until the next operation,” (Greal 187) and admits that the physical pain of chemotherapy worsened when she knew what to expect (82). Disability and illness serve as magnifying glasses on the minute changes always taking place inside the body; but ironically, the pain within them can also foster a warped sense of anticipatory dread. CI presents a way of negotiating this paradox, and remaining centered in a world that is constantly morphing by engaging in a dance that is similarly unpredictable.

As I described in chapter two, Greal’s text demonstrates the multiple roles that she embodies throughout her life, both related and unrelated to her illness. She reflects on this fact, embraces it, and—though she fixates on the turmoil of her face—acknowledges that it changes so frequently that she “never had time to become acquainted” (Greal 221) with anything other than its constant change. As a medium, dance is open to



multiplicity by the very fact that it places bodies in motion, but by cutting out the anticipatory rise and fall of narrative, Contact Improv is the most receptive to plurality of identity. By engaging participants in the mutable nature of their surroundings, the pressure to conform to one label disappears: “Whether we identify ourselves as Son, Mother, Dancer, Student, Frail, Charming, or Difficult, the dance floor reveals identities as mutable and as varied as the dance” (Pallant 67). All bodies, not just disabled ones, are constantly shifting; and though one card of identity may be shuffled to the top of the deck, it does not change the fact that a host of experiences and selves exist beneath it. By allowing space for these identities to ebb and flow, CI “provides a concretely irrefutable experience of a connection to something beyond our singularity” (Pallant 114)—both within ourselves and in relation to the world around us.

CI does more than encourage touch, it demands it: the exchange of weight sparks a domino effect, which “reinforces compassion by revealing how every action carries repercussions, repercussions that are conjoined” (Pallant 91). Grealy is no stranger to this effect; after all, it is a collision with another student during a kickball game—a blow that knocks her “into the present, the unmistakable *now*” (Grealy 14)—that sets the chain of events into motion that leads to her diagnosis. She muses on the idea of human touch with frequency, realizing that “part of the job of being human is to consistently underestimate our effect on other people” (65); but in CI, no such underestimation is possible. When two people share weight, no matter how steeled one partner may appear, he or she will inevitably move under the influence of another body. “Such a relationship cannot be taken lightly...when a hip bone presses into our flesh or hair flies in our faces, the stimuli compels acknowledgment and response” (Pallant 103). Though she struggles

to understand her place in relation to others, Grealy states that human touch “was akin to surrender, the closest I ever got to experiencing trust” (Grealy 153)—a fact best demonstrated by her friendship with Patchett. The synergy between the two is fundamental to their existence; and like CI, demonstrates that independence is found within interdependence.<sup>10</sup>

First and foremost, CI is a process of sharing weight; at any given moment, one is both receiving and giving. The dance ceases to exist otherwise. One of the most popular introductory exercises asks partners to stand back-to-back, distributing mass evenly through the shared surface area, and to walk out slowly until both are sitting on the floor. Like most CI exercises, “every weight shift, movement, and psychological state directly impacts a partner...one finds standing possible *only* if the partner offers a stable surface” (Pallant 39). This interdependence is the backbone of the dance, and the most significant metaphor that can be gleaned from it: each movement directly impacts another person, “without the presence of competition and struggle for dominance”: which in our culture, is a “rare dynamic” (86). Like Grealy and Patchett, who lift and lean on each other in a cycle—through life and through text—that keeps them on equal footing, CI works *only* if partners are on equal footing—it is what keeps them, quite literally, from falling to the floor. On a spiritual level, CI fosters the Buddhist notion of interconnectedness: “it’s about finding a balance...without sacrificing individual differences” (Pallant 85). Though one is responsible for the safety of another, the strength to support them “lies primarily within oneself” (Pallant 4): proving that independence is actually interrelatedness, harnessed by dialogue “where seemingly individual energies emerge and merge to create

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<sup>10</sup> Both theoretically, as I have attempted to demonstrate, and on a semantic level as well: “**interdependence.**”

a flow greater than any one person” (Pallant 87). The disabled and ill are not the only ones dependent on others; even when we are able to take our own pills, take out our own garbage, or sit upright without the aid of another person, we are *each and every one of us* reliant on others. CI is merely a physical reminder, a visual aid for acknowledging the fact that it is possible to be “fully absorbed” in ourselves, “but also, paradoxically, each other” (Pallant 116).

It sounds simple, but for many, interdependency is an inconvenient truth. For one, it destabilizes theories of feminism that claim the only empowered woman is one who is alone: not dependent on a man, not dependent on anyone but herself. This may have been a necessary stance to take in generations past, but it conflicts with another feminist train of thought—the one that “values all and demeans none” (Pallant 84). Feminism has “only relatively recently started to acknowledge disability as an important area of difference within its ranks” (Kuppers 50) because disability presents a problem for the connection between isolation and independence. Like the “fear of contagion” that disabled dancers provoke in audiences, or “the fear that the visible presence of someone else’s ‘large, aging, and dimpled thighs’ will unloose one’s own” (Albright 91), the disabled body reminds the world that *everyone* is dependent on others at some point. Every body deteriorates and every body ages. Contact Improv, by placing a full range of abilities together without labeling them—and requiring those bodies to physically lean on one another—breaks the false idea that, because they are outwardly reliant on others, disabled people are weak.

Far from perfect, CI is not without weaknesses that make it appealing to some and not to others; for example, despite the fact that it refuses to pinpoint any aesthetic as

being better than another, my experience with the dance has taught me that it is difficult to regulate this value. Inevitably, certain participants will prize some techniques—fluid transition between movements, for example—and feel less capable if they are unable to emulate it. Furthermore, like any physical activity that requires inversion and unpredictability, participants are put at risk of injury. However, the limitations of CI are overwhelmed by its strengths: over time, participants acquire the skills they believed to be unreachable—and it almost always comes as a result of releasing in the mind, unclenching from an ideal, and letting the body *react* organically to the movement of others. This constructive reliance is what separates CI from narrative-based dances—those it does not seek to compete with, nor replace—and is what makes it relevant to theories of autobiography that posit the self as a community-based identity (Smith and Watson 278). CI expands the notion of what it means to be disabled and what it means to be a woman; it is possible to rely on another without being needy, and it is possible to be needed without being a caregiver. Weight must be given in order to be taken.

### A Fair Share of Space

The disabled body plays a unique role in the performance world because it is often considered to be “transparent:” it is typically associated with the visible, physical body, from which one can never separate, and “it functions as a master sign in our culture” (Kuppers 54) as a result. Whereas other categories of identity may be appropriated or shed, disability is commonly associated with the physical body—and how can a physical handicap be taken on or off? It cannot; however, it is not impossible to perform disability. This is a restoration of agency, an expansion upon what Luce Irigaray

calls “mimesis,” or subversion through a purposeful appropriation of characteristics associated with identity categories. Like Butler, Irigaray says that for a disabled woman “to play with mimesis” is to “recover the place of her exploitation by discourse...so as to make visible, by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible” (Kozel 102). Just as Mairs momentarily fools a doctor with her appropriation of “abled,” performance of dis/ability—especially in Contact Improv, where ability is understood to exist on a spectrum—demands that the abnormal body have a place both onstage and off. Often, the lack of privacy created by constant medical treatment and social gawking has “undermined many [disabled] people’s ability to be confident in their use of space” (Kuppers 125); so to dance, to let one’s physical body take more than its fair share of space, is an act of empowerment.

Is it possible for the disabled to perform ability? If it means a paraplegic bounding out of a wheelchair and running a marathon, only to shout “Gotcha!” at the end of the race, the answer is always going to be *no*. However, disability is not always visible—and the qualities of able-bodiedness may be appropriated and subverted. “Art is, for many readers”—and audience members—“an enabling concept” (McRobbie 230); so when artists intentionally disable an able-bodied audience, showing them that their identities may be tried on and discarded, the dis/abled hierarchy is blown skyward—leaving empty space in its wake, a blank slate for a new vocabulary to emerge. Dance, a medium that “insists on changes in location, on moving through spaces” (Albright 133), represents the frame; and Contact Improv, by insisting on the present moment, and embracing the “sticky web of identifications” (Albright 133) inherent in each body, is the canvas. CI paves the way for a new type of math equation: just as being disabled and

being a woman does not necessitate identification as a disabled woman, in CI, one body plus one body does not equal two: there is always the third entity, the mystery of the “elemental tie” that emerges in the “tangible presence of another” (Pallant 102), that keeps it one step ahead of any language that threatens to limit it.

## CONCLUSION

### Moment[um]

As Emma Goldman once said, “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.” In this thesis, I have argued that dance—with bodies or with words—is much

more than a perfect pirouette, or defiance of corporeality. In Contact Improv, reality is the backbone of the revolution that Goldman calls for: regardless of body type or dis/ability, dancers are encouraged to give more weight—to lower the center of gravity—in order stay grounded, and to remain connected to the authenticity of individual shapes. For bodies that have historically been marginalized, to dance—to take up space, whether on the cool marley of a dance studio or the blank pages of a book—is to stake claim to territory that has typically excluded them. It brings the social powers forming that exclusion into question: why have certain bodies been prized, certain ways of moving given more value, and what fears are those judgments covering up? When the dis/abled perform the stories of their bodies, it makes able-bodied audiences aware of their simultaneous sameness and difference; it reminds them of their own organic, fallible bodies, and breaks the stigma surrounding dis/abled “Otherness.” In the case of CI, participants—dis/abled or not—are brought into physical proximity with another, sharing weight in a mutual dialogue until the definition of that Otherness is as blurry as the dance itself.

Dis/ability and illness, arguably more so than any other identity category, have been associated with lack of authority: those bodies so “marked” (Ferris 91) are unable to shift in and out of their physical ailments. However, as I have demonstrated, the liberating forums of life writing and Contact Improv provide space for performance, both portrayal of able-bodiedness and articulation of disability-specific vocabulary, which radically question any binaristic definition of dis/ability. In keeping with all bodily processes, the experience of being dis/abled is constantly changing, and can be effectively represented through mediums that are themselves continually morphing. Both

Grealy and Mairs utilize the flexible forum of life writing to shift in and out of their multiple identities; denying the fixity of the “self” in autobiography and challenging the fixity of disability and illness as a societal label. Though intensely personal, both writers seamlessly incorporate their corporeal struggles into the rest of the trials and tribulations of their daily lives—thus reaching out to audiences, and refusing to essentialize what is often considered a radically specific experience. Furthermore, their discussion of dis-ease and depression challenges the societal hierarchy that posits physical ailments as most debilitating. This interrelationship between body and mind—as well as the interdependency each writer engages in—is what bridges them to CI, which I believe is a comprehensive tool toward the articulation, and rehabilitation, of the body-mind unit.

At times, the fundamentals of Contact have made their way into official rehabilitative services. Professor Janet Hamburg used the Bartenieff Fundamentals—a branch of Laban Movement Analysis,<sup>11</sup> a technique very similar to CI in its philosophy and practice—to develop a system called “Motivating Moves for People With Parkinson’s.” The system is a series of simple exercises and visualizations that target the basal ganglia area of the brain, the center that controls movement, and has had remarkable success in getting Parkinson’s patients “unstuck” from frozen moments. This is merely one demonstration of how, when the ailment is psycho-physical—as ailment always is—the treatment must be comprehensive as well. However, even when the impetus is not strictly “rehabilitative,” the philosophy and practice contained in CI addresses holding patterns in the body and mind in a way that is true to their mutually informing relationship.

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<sup>11</sup> Created by Rudolph Laban, LMA is a system for describing, interpreting, and notating patterns of movement based on four categories of analysis: body, shape, effort, and space.



I have argued that dancing holds potential for expression where mere words cannot go, engaging audiences in physical as well as visual manner; however, the language of the body and a body of language are not separate universes. Rather, to look at writing and dance together as an “intratext” is the only way to capture the full range of experience. Just as the act of writing cannot be separated from the physical body that takes pen to paper, the reflective self can never be taken out of dance—and Contact Improv, by abandoning clean-cut endings in favor of the emergence of individual stories, is the ideal forum for this overlap.

Occasionally, CI does incorporate narrative: during one improvisation class, my peers and I were led through an exercise that combined dance and writing in a manner more significant than anything I have ever encountered. First, we were given five minutes to write a memory of a place—any place—with the only requirement being to let our words flow without second-guessing them. Secondly, we were asked to find a partner; and together, after reading our separate memories, to engage in an improvisational dance that revealed the similarities between our remembered experiences. Each person memorized one or two lines of his or her own text to recite out loud; and the final product was a stunning physical, and verbal, dialogue that captured the interrelatedness within our independent experiences. Having necessarily only touched on the vast existing literature on dis/ability, autobiography, and dance, I know better than to believe that I can provide an answer to what is a complex and highly sensitive area of study; however, I believe that the above exercise provides a vital suggestion. The interdisciplinary dialogue between writing and dance—much like my stance in the Humanities major, and my impetus for

taking on this project—presents an opportunity for understanding one’s own body, and those that may seem different, in a way that enriches fluency in both disciplines.

Without a doubt, the best part of this project has been the chance to experience, not only theorize, Contact. For the past few months, I have participated in twice-weekly CI classes with a group of students who, like myself, were completely new to the form. While no one in the group identifies as physically disabled, the wide range of physical and emotional experiences made each session—and each partnership—an exercise in listening to individual strengths and weaknesses. Those of us who entered the room with considerable dance experience were no better off than someone without it; no amount of physical preparation can cushion the profoundly vulnerable act of giving, and taking, weight. At one point, simply cradling another’s head in my hands—and feeling the moment when she registered the trust that my presence provided—allowed my body to yield to the floor in a way that hadn’t previously been accessible. As I continue to engage with the literature on CI, I am proud to say that my personal experience with the form has reinforced my belief in its potential: for disabled bodies, yes, but for *all* bodies equally. As one acquaintance told me, herself a cancer survivor, “Contact Improv is, of all the types of dance I’ve done, the best metaphor for life.” You lean, you take, you learn. There is nothing but the present, the moment[um] that each dialogue creates, to carry from one moment to the next.

“*Disability* describes a condition that rests both in identity and in a complex set of social relations that can affect many people, if not all, in sentient life” (Crutchfield & Epstein 9)—so why are dis/ability studies not considered an essential part of every collegiate curriculum? Why, when we at the Claremont Colleges receive notification of a

“Developing Allies Workshop,” is ability not listed as one of the categories that delineate privilege? In the future, it is my hope that dis/ability will be understood as a topic that affects everyone, not only those who identify as disabled; and that by engaging in activities that treat the mind and body holistically, issues surrounding body image and disabling dis-ease will be given due attention as well. Though language limits the body, like dis/ability itself, words are ambivalent: the same movement that may be deemed unnatural may also be a *movement*, a radical mobilization of people demanding political change. The potential for transformation rests in the hands—and feet, and wheels—of those willing to realize that dis/ability does not exist in a binary, and that the vocabulary created by marginalized bodies, besides being *moving* (poignant, touching), writes an imperative word in the text of embodiment. All one has to do is read it.

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